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*"But this one is different," the big man reminded him. "This one is very different. The boss said only you could handle it."*

# RIGHT THING TO DO

BY  
ROBERT  
LEON



FOR a long time he had felt that this thing might happen, but in spite of the prevailing symptoms, he never considered what he would do when this bitter moment came. With his thumb and index finger clamped over his mouth, Judge leaned against the window, staring wistfully at the scattering snow. His eye would pick out a thick descending flake and would follow it down, until it became lost among the thousands of flakes that settled on the ground.

Behind him the big man shifted his weight and coughed. "Well?" the man asked, coughing again.

Judge squeezed his lips together thoughtfully. Then he turned to



face the man. "What more is there? You've brought me the word—there's nothing more. What else do you want?"

Small, probing eyes, that never seemed to blink, reflected the virulence in the giant's heart. His lead-colored lips munched on a cigarette. "I got ta get an o.k.," he said. "Are you going to hit him?"

Judge blinked at him, knuckled his nose and pulled at his ear lobe. Those who died before the crackling guns were patterns in the bloody tapestry he had woven for the Circle. Each body he wrapped in concrete and plunged into the liquid coffin of surrounding lakes meant nothing more to him than just another job completed. How could those lakes have been mirrors reflecting his countenance?

Gone from Judge's face was the criminal callousness, in its place there settled a pallor of dread. Judge's eyes wandered the length of the room and settled on his automatic that nested in the leather shoulder holster on the chair. With his eyes riveted to the butt of the gun, Judge said with finality: "You know I've never refused a job."

"But this one is different," the big man reminded him. "This one is *very* different. The boss said only you could handle it."

Normally a member of the Circle did not argue with another, especially against the giant, but Judge could not control the words that scrambled from his lips. "Sure! It

figures, the boss gives me the nod! Why not? Ain't I got the rep? Ain't I the ace of the rod?" And the words, in their haste to rush past his lips, became jammed in his throat, and Judge gagged. "But—" he breathed heavily, "but, this one in particular—why must I do this one?"

Amazement flickered in the corner of the giant's mouth. "Look, Judge, you know the reason. Ain't a man in the Circle what can get close enough to him. He'd pop the moment he spotted one of us. He was always straight with the rod. But you, Judge, he trusts you. So you're it."

Judge raked his fingers through his pomaded, black curls. That was the trouble. He knew it. Eager now to rid the room of the giant he pounded his fist into his palm and muttered: "I'm it."

The giant smiled, trying to offer friendliness, but on his face, the expression was a grimace. When he noticed no reaction from Judge, the giant lifted his hand, fingers outstretched in salute, and sauntered leisurely from the room.

Judge reached for his cigarettes and found that only one remained in the twisted package. Lighting it he fell back into the creaking chair. A clock on the mahogany chest mournfully reminded him of the passing minutes. He rose, shuffled to the chest, pulled open the doors and selected a bottle of whiskey from the frosted shelf. With his in-



dex finger he wiped the inside of a tumbler and poured himself a drink. Crossing the room he fell ponderously on the divan, stretching out his long legs over the coral rug and wearily allowed his head to settle back to stare thoughtfully at the ceiling. And with the thoughts that wandered through his mind, his strong body became weak, leaking every drop of courage he had ever dammed.

In everybody's career there's the one tough assignment. His head rolled and his eyes snapped hard on the automatic in holster. The gun was still warm from the last killing, now it was to be reloaded for another victim. Somewhere out there, in the snow-shrouded city, the victim knew. And perhaps the victim wondered. Wondered why the Circle, which he had served loyally, had passed his death sentence.

The boss was always right. This particular victim would permit him to get close enough to start blasting. It was only normal since the victim was his own brother.

Judge covered his face with his hands. "Why, Tony? Why?" He cracked his knuckles as punishment for having spoken out loud. Look back. How beautiful it was, back there. Two young kids with big eyes for big money. Your eyes are bigger than your stomach. Roaming the night-drenched streets, filling their pockets with the harvest of their evil occupation. Up the twisted ladder of success they

dragged their eager bodies for quick money. And when disputes arose, their guns acted as their attorneys. At that time, independent operations were watched closely by the high priests of crime, and they were soon confronted with the ultimatum of joining the Circle, or being fitted out in a cement tuxedo. With their eyes still on those distant fields of green, they decided to fall into line; however, instead of remaining at a standstill, they were soon elevated to the proud ranks of the torpedoes. They became machines of murder, and by the bid-dings of the higher-ups, they quelled the opposition with their guns. Murder was no longer a business, it had become a sordid habit.

During their career of violence, they served as executioners. Putting to death members who had strayed off the line. Never had they realized that those victims were, in reality, themselves. Never thinking, like machines, after a button is pushed, they sought out the hunted. Any member of the Circle who was caught in the brilliant spotlight of the law was worthless and dangerous. He had to be eliminated. It was important to the Circle that none of these turned canary. And because of his own skill with a gun, he was often called in to take care of a rat.

Now the irony. It happened, it happens, and it will happen. Life is a tangled web of irony. Tony had decided to go straight. A simple decision, without warning, created

out of a kiss with a girl. Tony wasn't a canary—just a lovebird. The Circle couldn't recognize the distinction. Nobody quits.

Two trigger men were dispatched to hit Tony, but upon arriving at his apartment they found he had left. They sifted through the city, searching every probable hiding place, until they had to admit that Tony had vanished. Failure in a duty is never savored by the Circle. Nobody vanishes unless the Circle applies the cream.

The Circle was the dealer and expertly they pulled their ace from the deck. Don't under-estimate the top boys, they knew about the Judge long ago. Whether the top boys felt pity for him, or a feeling that he might break and run when faced with this task, they decided at first to dispatch two thugs from out of town to do the job. But the Judge was their ace, and now they were compelled to play him.

Judge rose to fill his glass again. Standing before the chest he held his drink at eye level and studied the amber liquid in the soft light of a gooseneck wall lamp. Could he ferret out his brother, embrace him, show him that there was nothing to fear, then coldly pull out his gun and squeeze the trigger? He closed his eyes at the idea, inhaling deeply, trying to believe that the whole picture was a fantasy. Here, in the warmth of his apartment, his heart was as cold as a slab in a morgue.

In the haze of his mind he re-

membered autumn. A cold day toward the end of the month when the leaves on the slumbrous trees curled up feebly and glided to the frosted earth. The earth that was to be torn open to receive his mother's casket.

"Nick . . . Tony," she whispered, her head framed by a pink pillow, the gray, silver-lined hair swirling around the pale, putty features, forming a soft halo. Her fingers were cold and damp when they closed over his hand, seeking some sort of assurance. "Nick—you'll take good care of Tony. He's such a young boy, and he always listens to you—he respects you—you'll watch him, won't you?"

He had fought off the urge to cry in front of his mother and brother. It was difficult to speak then, and the tears stung his eyes. What do you say to a dying person?

The letters were nailed together. "Sure, mom—I'll take care of Tony—don't you worry."

"Those bad men, Nick, do you still hang around with them?"

Let the journey be easier. "No, mom."

"I'm glad, Nick, I'm glad."

I love you, mom. I should have told you that more often. I love you—honestly.

"Nick?" Her voice was sharp with fear. The window pane rattled as the El rumbled past. "Is that the doctor coming?"

Somebody great did this job. Somebody who knew how to do it.

Peacefully she died. No blood. No terror. Just a gentle submission and the heart went on vacation forever.

He let the curtain fall into place and he returned to the table for his drink. A promise to his mother. But she was dead now, and what good were promises to the dead? Surely his promise wouldn't save him from the tentacles of the Circle. He searched his pockets for a cigarette and realizing that he had smoked the last one returned to the window. It was snowing harder now. If he left now, with good luck, he would have a good start. By tomorrow he could be thousands of miles away. Why not? He had been their crutch long enough. They weren't keeping score on his perfect record. A record so prominent that at any time he risked being sent away for a big jolt at the State College, or maybe take a rap for the hot squat. Were they square with him? That was a question that didn't take much deliberation. He recalled the jewelery theft.

It was a one-man job. And he fit the pattern. It was a set-up where he crashed a party that sported expensive merchandise. He put the snatch on a set of sapphires and slipped out of the noise and smoke, undetected. Downstairs he hurried around the corner to a waiting car. At the hideout the boss was waiting, impatiently. The boss sat glumly at a table with a deck of cards fanned across the top, one eye squinting from the attacking

smoke of his cigarette. After a moment of contemplation, he snapped a card down on the table. "It took a little while, didn't it, Judge?"

Nothing pleased him, Judge thought, as he moved toward the table, removing a handkerchief from his pocket and opening it, letting a half dozen glittering sapphires roll across the cards. "I got them."

"Good," the boss said, sorting the stones with his fingers. "Good," he repeated, counting them. Then his eyes hardened. "Jo-Jo," he snapped, "how many is supposed to be?"

"Seven, ain't it?" Jo-Jo said, looking for confirmation from a man who stood beside him.

"That's right," the man said, after staring up at the ceiling to do some quick calculating. "Supposed to be seven to the set. Why, boss?"

The boss directed his gaze at Judge. "There's only six here."

Judge stepped forward, bent over the table and counted them. He counted them again. "I don't understand."

The boss studied him, as if he were wondering how genuine his words were. "How come?" he asked, drawing the canopy of his shaggy eyebrows tight over his eyes.

Judge shrugged. At first he did not realize the significance of the missing stone. "I'm sure I put the snatch on the whole set."

As if to prove this statement, he counted the sapphires again, roll-



ing them carefully to one side. His mouth remained open. "I don't get it."

The boss made a tired gesture and two triggermen eased up behind him and began to pat his clothing. "Hey!" Judge protested, backing off. A man behind him stood in his way.

The boss arched an eyebrow as if he were surprised to see him indignant about being searched. "What's the matter, Judge?"

"What's the idea? What are you putting the heat on for? I didn't palm one."

The boss smiled and leaned back in the chair. "Maybe it's in your clothing Judge—without you knowing it, of course. I'm sure you don't mind the boys helping you find it."

It was the manner in which the boss said it that made Judge push away the groping hands. "What is this?" he snapped. "I'm clean."

A man locked both of his arms behind him while another continued to search through his pockets. The boss rose. "Why don't you cooperate?"

Judge struggled to free himself. "I don't have to take this."

Calmly the boss circled the table and with his opened hand slapped Judge's head back viciously. "I don't like your attitude. Now, keep your lips zipped."

Judge held his head back. One of the men searching him looked up. "Nothin', boss, he's clean."

The boss grunted. "I'm not satisfied."

"And I'm not either!" Judge shouted. "You guys must be bugs. I put the snatch on the whole set. What do you take me for? I must've lost it."

Nobody spoke. Gelid eyes testified tacitly to the suspicion that crawled through the minds of the men.

Judge clenched his fists. "What the hell—you fanned me—aren't you satisfied?"

The boss nodded to the door. "Toss him in there, and gun him for the night. Charlie, Getzie, retrace your steps and skin your eyes for the piece. I want you to shake the entire area—comb the car—check everything. And get back as soon as you can."

The night he had spent in the room was one filled with dread. Opposing the Circle was a treasonable act, and his being innocent of the suspected treachery deepened his gloom. Every five minutes his eyes would dart to the luminous clock on the table. At two o'clock the gunmen returned. He could hear their voices humming in the other room. Silence followed, and then they invaded the room. The boss looked at him, smiled wryly, and scratched his head.

"They couldn't find it."

Judge stared moodily at the boss. His mouth felt like a dried-out mudhole.

The boss looked down him

scornfully. "We'll give you until morning, Judge. Think about it."

Then they were gone. Each new tick of the clock was met by the beat of his throbbing heart. His fingers clawed inside of his clothes in search of a cigarette, and upon finding it had to straighten it out, because his nervousness in taking hold of it had damaged it. In the orange flame of the match the shadows leaped off the walls at him, reaching for him, and he hastily waved out the match, sending away the shadows to mingle once again with the swollen darkness. All that he had to do was to rise and flip the switch on the wall, and he would have had light, but something within him kept him nailed to the sofa. He was afraid to move. Perhaps the slightest sound would bring them running into the room with their guns drawn. He wanted to fondle every moment from now until the dawn. He settled back, gazed up at the ceiling, and ran his tongue slowly around the inside of his mouth, inspecting the crevices between his teeth. The texture of his teeth reminded him that he had not brushed them that morning, and strangely enough, for the first time, it bothered him. He wished he could do it now. No matter how many times he swiveled his tongue around in his mouth, or pursed his lips, he could not expel the dryness that clung tenaciously to his palate.

What would they do to him?

That was an absurd question! What does the Circle do with men who are no longer useful, or are under suspicion? At dawn they would come to question him, and his answers would be the same. He pulled hard on the cigarette as he thought about it. His eyes narrowed as his ears devoured every little sound. The clanging of a trolley that passed outside the window. A swish of tires as a car swayed over the trolley tracks. The buzzing of a broken neon sign that spelled DI E over the little diner across the street. A sandpaper growl of an alley cat somewhere below the window.

When the dawn came, the softness of its light poked at his eyelids. Quickly he swung his legs off the sofa and glanced around the room. He was alone. The clock yawned six minutes past six. Judge scratched his arm and let his shoulders sag forward. Sleeping on the sofa for the night had put a cramp in his back. If only he could go home and go to the bed. Nothing stirred in the outer room. He fished a broken cigarette from his shirt pocket.

The door opened. Two men drifted in casually. One of the men kicked the door shut with his heel. They stared at each other, then at Judge. One of them gestured wearily.

"You can get up."

Judge rose slowly, but he kept his eyes on the men. His mind labored

toward a plan. If need be, if worse came to worse, he would fight his way out. His body became tense.

One of the men smiled broadly. "You're lucky, Judge. The boss just heard on the radio that somebody found the sapphire in the street and reported it to the police. You can go now."

Judge filled his glass again. His mind hurt with the problem that raged within. Kill his brother! Maybe he could skip—but they would track him down no matter where he fled. The police offered no solace. For even in prison there were inactive members who would gladly shove a rat-tail file in his back. There was only one solution. A life for a life. His assignment was given, and he had a few moments to decide.

Years of blood and bullets. The ruthless struggle to success and the big payoff. The wind brought their voices into the room.

"Gee, Judge, I'm scared!"

"Nix, kid, stop crawlin'—you're with me, ain't you? We'll both go to the top."

"Sure, Judge, anything you say."

Well, this is where you brought him, and this is where you brought yourself. Funny, nothing he ever did seemed so bad as long as he was sharing the act with Tony. Now, they would perform in the final act together. After the shot, the silence, the eternal silence. Look into his eyes, see the love mirrored there,

then squeeze the trigger. The sweat poured down his face. He heard the shot, twisted, almost as if the bullet had entered his own body.

He rapped the drink down on the table unfinished. His eyes darted around the furnishings of the room, finally resting on the leather holster on the chair. He shuffled to the chair, slipped the holster from its place and buckled it around his shoulder. He jerked out the automatic and it was cold in the hotness of his palm. Clumsily he removed the clip and checked the cartridges, then he slammed it angrily back into the butt of the gun. He put his jacket on and adjusted his tie in front of the mirror that hung over the sofa. He tapped the day's growth of stubble with his palms, then noticing the bulge of the gun under his jacket, shoved it further beneath his arm. In his pocket he found a fresh package of cigarettes. Abstractly he ripped apart the tin-foil and gouged a cigarette out, putting it quickly into his mouth. The window pane rattled furiously under the slap slap of the wind. Searching his pockets for matches, and not finding any, he shrugged to himself and started for the door. He opened it, paused a moment to glance around the room, then shuffled out.

A voice through the swirling snow boomed at him. "Your hands up, Judge—you're covered!"

Instinctively, Judge doubled over and jerked his gun from the hol-



ster. A single shot rang out and Judge straightened. Snowflakes stuck to his fluttering eyelids as he slanted his legs apart to balance himself. His fingers came apart like soft wax and the gun fell into the snow at his feet. For a second he stood there, staring into the swirling darkness, then he leaned forward and buckled into the snow. Beneath his body, as he lay in the coldness on his side, the snow turned red.

Through the flurry two dark shadows approached him. As they came closer, Judge perceived their uniforms. He groaned as the boot of one of the officers hooked into

his belly and turned him over on his back. Between the two officers, who now stood over him, looking down, another man approached.

Judge's eyes widened in spite of the snowflakes that stung his face.

"Tony! Is it you?"

Tony refused to meet his gaze. "It's me, Judge. I didn't want them to shoot you, honest. I just told them where they could find you. Why did you go for your gun—"

"That's o.k., kid, you did what you thought was right," blood gurgling in his throat caused him to swallow painfully, "— and I—" he sighed, trying to sit up, "I tried to do what I thought was—"



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*Tijuana is a wide open town and Garcia had a product to sell that even the police smiled upon.*

## PICS FOR SALE

BY BEN SATTERFIELD



GARCIA arranged the pictures in neat stacks and placed them in the drawer of the table, with the little books on the right-hand side in rows of eight. He turned out the light and locked the door to his shack and walked up the side street toward the corner where he worked. One of the girls in the house next door yelled something to him as he left, but he did not an-

swer. When he reached his corner, he saw that Manuel, the taco man, already had his cart out and was doing business. Only the Mexicans were eating now, but later the Americans would come out of the bars and stagger down the street looking for food and trying to sober up enough to drive back across the border. *Manuel's tacos would sober them up all right*, Garcia thought

to himself, *if they knew what he put in them*. He smiled at Manuel and took his place on the corner, with his back to the wall, and casually watched the tourists as they streamed up and down and across the gaudy, dirty, and very busy street.

Just off the curb, standing in the street, was Torres, grabbing at the lone men and the small groups of men without the protection of their wives or girlfriends.

A pair of young sailors strolled by and Torres caught one by the arm as he stepped into the street and pulled him aside, frantically motioning for the other one to follow. Garcia watched as Torres talked and winked and rolled his eyes and made curves in the air with his hands while the sailors took in every gesture with obvious and eager delight.

"Okay," Torres said loudly, and motioned them to his taxicab; they got in quickly and Torres raced the engine and slung the car around in the street and off they went. Watching them, it was hard for Garcia to decide who was the most anxious, Torres or the sailors.

Garcia, unlike Torres, did not hail people promiscuously or grab them or follow them down the street trying to promote his business. His customers were more elite—or unique, if you like—and if they wanted what he had to offer, they would let him know right away and would not try to escape.

Juan Tellechea, in his leather jacket and brown police cap, shuffled slowly across the street. "*¡Hola!*" he called to Garcia, and Garcia nodded. They talked for a few minutes in Spanish and then Juan moved on down the street, looking in the bars and waving and talking to people.

A short, middle-aged man with puffy lips and a thick crown of blond hair rounded the corner and Garcia hissed "Books—peek-tures?" and the man looked around but kept on walking. "Nah," he said, and Garcia shrugged his shoulders, rested his back against the wall and waited for the next prospect.

Three boys in a group came out of a bar across the street and crossed over to Garcia's corner and as they passed by, he whispered to them, but they were not interested. Manuel smiled at him from his taco cart, then turned around to shout "Taco, meester?" to a Marine corporal who ignored him. The corporal stepped into the street just as Torres parked his taxicab, and Torres tore out of the car and approached the Marine, talking rapidly and waving his hands, but the Marine kept on walking. Torres threw up his hands and yelled something to Manuel who agreed with him.

Garcia waited until the corporal was right in front of him. "Books—peek-tures?" He stopped. Garcia waited. The Marine looked around, then stepped up close. "What you



got?" he asked carefully.

"Good stuff. Ver-r-ry good."

"I don't see nothin'."

"Come on—I'll show you." Garcia pointed down the side street.

"Oh no! I ain't fallin' for that."

"No," Garcia answered. "Eet's okay. My place ees right there. You see tha' leetle place."

"Well . . . okay," the Marine answered. He was a tall, bony, brown-eyed kid, not more than twenty-two, with a clean shave and an immaculate uniform. On his chest he wore a single row of service ribbons, none with stars or clusters. Garcia led the way and the Marine followed stiffly to the shack. The house next door had four windows on the front, and as Garcia unlocked his door, one of the girls leaned out and saw the Marine.

"Hey, soljer," she called, smacking bubble gum between her teeth, "you want some real theeng, maybe?" The corporal did not look at her and she called again, using more descriptive, provocative language. Garcia yelled "*¡Caete! Este jóven ya está ocupado,*" and the girl spat, made a face at him, and went back to blowing bubbles. Garcia turned on the light and closed the door behind the corporal. "Now you see," he said, opening the drawer and removing a thin stack of pictures. "Look at thees one," he said, picking out a particularly obscene picture. The Marine nodded and took the stack and began appraising each one. "Ooo-eee!" he

squealed when he came to a shot of a girl doing a bizarre trick that looked anatomically impossible. "How much?"

"One dollar—each," Garcia answered. "'Ow 'bout books? 'Ave lotta books."

"Lemme see," whispered the Marine. His mouth hung open and his hands trembled as he thumbed through the little books. "How much're these?"

Garcia held up one hand, fingers spread wide. "Five for dollar."

The corporal wrinkled his brow.

"That ees *good* price," Garcia whimpered. "Only weeth peektures, five for dollar."

They bickered and bargained, but Garcia knew he had a pigeon. Usually he received about five dollars a dozen for the large prints, and sometimes threw in the books free; but the younger the customers, the more they paid.

"Okay," Garcia said. "Tan dollars for dozen—no books."

Happily, the Marine agreed and gave Garcia a twenty dollar bill which immediately he stuffed into his pocket. He pulled a manila envelope from the table, blew the dust off, and slid two dozen pictures inside.

"Good deal," he said, smiling.

The young corporal went out and walked up the side street with the envelope snuggled under his arm, and Garcia watched him until he rounded the corner, then sat down at his table and laughed. He

laughed long, hard and loud.

The Marine was half-way down the block when Juan Tellechea, seeing the brown envelope, stopped him. "What you got there?" he asked.

"Nothin'."

"Let me see thees nothing."

The corporal looked around, wiped his brow, shuffled his feet and stammered, "It ain't nothin'. It's mine—just some stuff of mine."

Juan reached for the envelope and the Marine backed away. "No trubble," Juan said, holding him and taking the envelope. He opened it, shook the pictures out, and exclaimed: "Oh, *señor*, thees ees illegal. Don' you know?"

"I didn't know nothin' wuz illegal down here. Now gimme back my pictures."

"No, *señor*," Juan said coolly. "Illegal."

"Dammit, you—" He stopped when Juan pushed the leather jacket aside and the pistol came into view.

"You want go Police Station?"

"No . . . it's awright," the Marine answered sadly, then turned and walked away, leaving Juan Tellechea and the pictures behind.

The policeman, flashing a big grin, pulled his jacket straight and walked to the corner. The taxicab pulled away with three men inside and Torres yelled "*Hasta luego*" and Juan waved to him, then winked at Manuel across the street. Manuel chuckled in return and watched him go down the side street and into Garcia's shack, the envelope of pictures tucked under his arm.



# A QUESTION OF VALUES

*The ageing husband and his wife's young lover met in an isolated hunting lodge. The older and wiser man posed a question . . . and the arrogant young man was left with a difficult decision.*

BY

C. L. SWEENEY, JR.

I SUPPOSE that every older man with a young and beautiful wife asks himself these same questions sooner or later. Sooner or later he awakes one morning and sees his wife lying there beside him, sees her young and warm and desirable there in her sleep, and for no reason at all a little sliver of panic suddenly forces itself into the back of his mind.

He hurries into the bathroom, turns on the light and hopefully examines himself closely in the mir-

ror, searching for a reassurance that is not there. He sees instead a man no longer young, grey flecks in the stubble of beard, white in the hair at the temples, and eyes pouched and tired.

And then the panic sharpens unreasonably and the questions begin to flood into his mind. Will a younger man try to take her away from me? Who will he be? What will he look like? What will she do? What will I do? These—and a thousand others like them.





For most men these questions need never be answered, simply because, like most things we worry about, the event never occurs. For others, like myself, the questions are forced on them and must be met.

When the time comes, however, some of them will obviously answer themselves. For example, what will he look like? There was no longer any reason to wonder. He sat across from me now, a young man of about her age, handsome, almost pretty, soft like his expensively tailored cashmere jacket, soft like the skin on his beautifully tapered hands, strangely out of place here against the worn books and racked guns and roughly hewn logs of my hunting lodge.

"Really," he said petulantly, looking about the room with obvious distaste, "I don't see why you should ask me to drive up to the top of this Godforsaken mountain."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I've always found that I can think better, clearer somehow, up here at the lodge. The mountain air perhaps, the clean scent of the pines. I thought we could make our decisions more intelligently up here than in some crowded bar in the city."

"Decisions?" He flicked at an invisible spot on his cashmere lapel. "There was only one decision to be made. That was hers and she made it. She's leaving you. That's all

there appears to be to it."

I leaned forward in my chair. "But *has* she really made that decision?" I asked him. "Does she know you well enough as a man to decide that she can love you better than she has loved me?"

"I don't follow you," he said, his voice sulky, bored.

"I'm suggesting," I said, watching his delicate hands, white against the dark oak of the table, "the possibility that she doesn't really love you, the possibility that she is only temporarily infatuated because you are a rising young concert pianist and because she has always loved music. I'm suggesting that perhaps she is in love with your talent, with the artistry in your hands, not with you as a man."

His lip curled disdainfully. "That's ridiculous," he said.

"Ah," I said, "but how do we know? That's one of the questions which must be answered."

He looked at his watch and yawned. "Really, if this is all you have to—"

"No," I said, "it's not all. There's also the question of what I will do about it."

"What you will do about it?" He shrugged. "And what do you think you can do about it?"

"The choices are simple," I said. "I can let her go or I can refuse to give her a divorce and keep her. On the other hand, the decision between these choices is much more

difficult. You see, it's not easy to give up the woman you've adored for almost five years."

He shrugged again and smiled. "I wouldn't know," he said.

"No," I agreed, "I suppose you wouldn't, and yet I want you to understand exactly how I feel, appreciate the importance of this decision to me." I thought for a moment and then my eyes stopped and steadied on those soft, white beautiful hands of his. "Yes," I said slowly. "Yes, I believe that's it. I believe that losing her would mean as much to me as, say, losing one of those hands would mean to you."

He winced involuntarily and pulled his hands back into his lap.

I laughed. "I'm sorry if that upset you," I said. "I was only trying to draw a comparison."

He cleared his throat, moved uneasily in his chair and looked at his watch again.

"So there we have it," I said, before he had a chance to speak. "She has a question to answer and I have a question to answer. And yet, oddly enough, neither of us can come to an intelligent decision until we know how your question will be answered."

"Question?" I watched him closely. A few tiny beads of perspiration were beginning to form along his brow. "I'm not aware of any question I'm supposed to answer."

"Ah," I said, "but don't you see? That's just the point. Of the three of us, you're the only one who has

no question to answer, no decision to make, everything to gain, nothing to lose. It offends my sense of fairness."

He started to get up. "Really—" he said.

I stood up with him. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm afraid that I've been a poor host, moralizing to you like this, not even offering you a drink." I went to the cupboard and took down two glasses. "Surely you'll at least have one with me now before you go."

He hesitated for a moment, then, "All right, just one," he said, "just one for the road."

"Just one for the road," I agreed and went to the heavy ring bolt in the floor in front of the fireplace and tried to lift the trapdoor. "I keep my liquor in the little cellar under here," I explained and pulled on the ring again, tugging at it this time. He had moved over to watch me and I looked up at him. "I haven't opened it for some time and it seems to be stuck," I said apologetically. "Perhaps you'd—?"

He knelt down and grasped the ring with me, his right hand against my left. "All right," I said, "all together when I give the word." I put my right hand into my hip pocket and removed the steel handcuffs. "Now," I said. He strained upward and I snapped the cuffs tight, one about his wrist, the other through the ring. Then I stood up.

He looked at the cuffs and then at me, his face suddenly pale. "What

is this, a game?" he said tightly. "Are you crazy?"

"No," I said "or at least I'm reasonably sure that I'm not. I'm merely trying to illustrate what I was saying before, that of the three of us you alone have had no question to answer, you alone have been spared the pain of a decision."

I walked to the mantle over the fireplace and took down a heavy hunting knife and balanced the point thoughtfully on the tip of my forefinger. He watched me, fascinated at first, then little sounds like whimpering beginning to come from his throat. I laughed. "Don't worry," I said, "I'm not going to harm you. The decision will be entirely your own." I held the knife out to him, handle first, but he only stared at it, refused to touch it, and so I drove it into the floor beside him, where he could reach it when the time came.

"They'll find me here," he said. The whimpering had become more distinct. "They'll miss me. They'll come looking for me."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, they'll come looking for you, but in the meantime you'll have already made your decision and then perhaps she and I will be able to make ours."

I turned my back to him and

went to the corner and took the can of kerosene and began to soak the walls, the books, everything. I felt his eyes on me and heard the rising panic in his harsh breathing but I didn't look at him again until I had tossed a wad of burning rags against one wall and watched the flames leap to the ceiling.

I went to the door then, opened it and turned. I saw him through the eddies of smoke, on hands and knees, choking, sobbing, frantically digging at the wood about the bolt with the knife.

"It's no use," I said. "It's four inch oak and the door has been bolted down."

He stopped and looked at me, the sobs rising to a scream. "Don't leave me, I'll burn, I'll burn."

I shook my head. "Not necessarily," I said.

Slowly then his eyes left me and went to the gleaming knife in his left hand, to the white wrist imprisoned by the steel cuff. Finally, realizing, eyes wide with shock, he looked back to me.

I bowed slightly. "Your question," I said and closed the door and got into my car and drove down the mountain to the broad highway leading into the city, never looking back.



SOME people are born to be in business for themselves and some are born to work for somebody else. The day I stood outside my joint and watched the *For Lease* sign being put in the window, I realized I came in the latter category. For almost two years I

had run an honest joint, sweating out taxes, cops, hoods, payrolls, the price of booze and everything else in the book, and had finally gone broke.

And during those last days as a businessman, I began to wonder about something else. I'd see Mack

## BODYGUARD

*Vinnie got his feet wet when he accepted the job from Big Mack Silverman. Then he met Fran, Big Mack's girl . . . and it was just a matter of time until he was in over his head.*

BY RICHARD HARDWICK



Silverman driving through the streets in a black Cadillac half a city block long and somewhere I'd hear a little voice saying, "Crime *does* pay—and damned well!"

Mack wanted me to come to work for him, even though the pressure that put me out of business had been indirectly exerted by him. It seemed to me to be more than coincidence that the big black Caddie pulled up at the curb just as they finished hanging the *For Lease* sign. Mack himself was leaning forward in the back seat, the window rolled down, and his big face smiling ruefully out at me.

"It's a tough business, Vinnie," he said. "A tough business." Then he opened the door. "Come on, Vinnie, get in. I got a proposition I want to talk to you about."

I hesitated a moment, then I saw past him and even if Mack hadn't asked me to get in I would have tried to anyhow. The girl sitting beside him was no ordinary broad, even from five yards away with about 300 pounds of Mack Silverman between us, I could tell that much.

What I could see of the nylon-sheathed leg and the plunging neckline that was fighting a losing battle on two fronts only made me want to see more.

"I'm looking for a proposition," I said, and walked across the sidewalk to the open door.

He slid back in the seat and I climbed through, coming to rest on

the other end of the seat, with the girl between us.

Mack smiled affably at me. "Vinnie, meet Fran. Fran, this is Vinnie Pratt."

"Okay, Herbie," Mack said to the man at the wheel, and the Cadillac pulled away from the curb. We tooled through the taxpayers' streets with no regard for law. I saw at least two harness bulls make a point of looking in shop windows when we busted a couple of red lights. I wondered if the show was for my benefit. Regardless, it was an effective demonstration of the depth of Mack Silverman's hold over the city.

"Vinnie, I got a job open at the Zebra Club, that is, if you're looking for work," he said.

"What sort of job, Mack?" I asked.

"Independent, that's what I've always liked about you," he said, with a laugh. "Bar. Start you at the bar."

"I'm pretty good at sweeping floors, too. Anything like that open?"

The girl looked at me in a funny way, as if she hadn't heard anyone talk to Mack like this. But Mack laughed again. "Didn't I tell you, baby? Didn't I tell you this guy was a riot?"

A couple of minutes later, Herbie swung the car into the lot behind the Zebra Club, and stopped at a back entrance. "Let's go up to my office and see what we can come up



with Vinnie. I can find something that'd suit you."

"Sure. There must be something," I said, and caught Fran's eye. Mack was getting out of the car and didn't see me, but Fran didn't miss my meaning. We went in the door and down a hall to an elevator. It carried us up to Mack Silverman's private office on the third floor of the building. Up there the carpets were ankle-deep, the walls worm-eaten by imported worms, the furnishings as mellow as Kentucky whiskey.

"Fix yourself a drink, Vinnie," Mack said, indicating the bar at one end of the room. "Look after him, Fran." Mack went through a door at the far end of the room and Herbie followed him.

"What can I fix for you, Fran?" I said when we were alone.

"Whatever you're having," she said. "I've got a feeling I like the same things you do."

"Yeah. Me too," I said. I made a couple of martinis, which is one thing I'm good at. I handed one to her. "You know Mack for long?"

She seemed suspicious of the question, thinking maybe that I was feeling her out for Mack. "Let's talk about you. Mack says your bar folded. What was the matter? I thought this town was a good one for bars."

"It is. That's why there's so many of them." I shrugged. "There was one too many."

That got a smile out of her. I

wanted to say something else to make her smile, but Herbie came out of the door at the end of the room. "Mack says to come in."

I tossed off my drink and went into the inner office.

Mack Silverman sat behind a huge desk, which seemed only average with him behind it. He was a big man, heavy, but not fat. Solid, like a big piece of gristle. His head grew right out of his shoulders. If he had a neck, he kept it a secret. His head was a furry watermelon, with the nearest thing to handle-bar eyebrows I ever saw. When he laughed—which was often—his face squeezed together into a big prune, his eyes became knife-slits, but in the slits something shone like drops of wet lacquer. You knew he was looking at you.

(This room was even plusher than the other one. There were a couple of sofas, a wall bookcase, another smaller bar, and the big uncluttered desk. This was the throne room.)

Fran came in behind me and moved to the edge of his desk, where she took a seat. I got a fleeting impression of a parakeet perching on someone's shoulder, ready to echo his words.

"Well, how about it, Vinnie? Ready to take the job?" Mack said. "Could be just a start you know."

"It might be interesting to meet a payroll coming instead of going."

That knocked him out. "Good!"

He came from behind the desk and clapped me on the shoulder. "Why don't you start tomorrow. No need to rush. Come in in the morning at eight-thirty. Start with Carlos down at the main bar."

"Whatever you say."

"Let's go downstairs and have a drink to your new job, Vinnie."

Herbie and Fran stayed behind at a word from Mack and the three of us—Mack, the bodyguard, and myself—took the elevator down. The bodyguard stepped out first. I was second. But as soon as he was clear of the elevator, out where he could see down the hall toward the rear door, he reached quickly inside his coat and came out clutching his .38. There was the harsh crack of a shot, but not from his gun. He slumped, the .38 skittering across the carpeted floor of the hall. I didn't know what was happening, but I knew I'd be next whatever it was. So I hit the deck and rolled, and as I did, I wrapped my fingers around the butt of the pistol lying on the floor. In that split second two more shots rang out. I expected them to be for me, but I heard Mack Silverman grunt with pain behind me. At the end of the hall I saw them, two of them, and the pistol in my fist came up firing. I didn't think I'd forgotten how to use one, and now I was certain. The two men folded without another sound. Outside the door at the end of the hall a car roared off, spewing loose gravel behind it.

I got up and went down the hall, the .38 aimed at the two figures on the floor ahead of me. But they were past doing anything about me, and I turned and went back to where Mack Silverman sat leaning against the wall, looking down at a stain that spread rapidly across the broad expanse of his coatfront.

"You hit bad?" I asked him. A head poked cautiously in at the end of the hall toward the bar. It was Juan Carlos, a bartender I'd worked with in Florida some years back. When he saw me kneeling beside Mack, he pushed the door wide and came running. Others followed, some with drawn guns.

"Get a doctor," I told Carlos.

"And a shot of brandy," Mack added, then looking at me, he added, "Make that two shots." Carlos rushed off.

"How about it?" I said.

"I don't think they did much damage," Mack looked down at his hand. Blood was squeezing out from between his fingers where he held them against his body. "Just hit some of the plumbing." He started to laugh, but stopped short with a pained look on his face.

Everybody was talking and staring. "Get 'em out of here, Vinnie! Get 'em all to hell out of here!"

I broke up the crowd, and in a few minutes, no one was in the hall but Mack, Herbie, myself, and three stiffs. From somewhere outside came the sound of sirens.

"Vinnie," Mack said, "why did-

n't you tell me you could handle a rod like that? Where'd you learn it?"

"I did a little shooting for the Marine Corps," I said.

He grunted. "Well, it'll get you more than a medal with me."

A doctor was there in a few minutes, followed closely by a couple of detectives and a uniformed cop. One of the detectives came over to me. "You're Vin Pratt, ain't you? What'd you have to do with this?"

"Lay off him, Delaney," Mack said. "Vinnie's working for me now."

The cop's eyebrows went up and he turned and joined the other two who were examining the dead men.

The doctor looked at Mack's wound, then turned to Fran. "He'll be okay, at least it looks that way. Is an ambulance on the way? I want to examine him at the hospital."

"We called the hospital before you got here," she said, then turned to me. "You saved his life."

I shrugged. "I saved mine too." She gave me a strange look and went back to Mack.

The cops finished their search of the two dead hoods. "Must be out of town boys, Mr. Silverman," one of them said. "No identification on either of them. Malone here don't recognize them and neither do I. We'll run 'em through R & I." He turned his attention to me. "We'll

need a statement from you, Pratt. Come down to the station as soon as you can."

The plainclothesmen touched their hats to Mack and turned and went out, leaving the uniformed cop to watch the bodies until the meat wagon arrived. It was that easy, when you had connections in the right places. And Mack Silverman had them.

I never got the job bartending at the Zebra Club. Before I started I was promoted. I took the place of the unfortunate gent who had been first man off the elevator. I got a permit to carry a gun—Mack never broke the law unless it got in his way—and inherited the .38 I had used that day in the gun battle. Four days after closing Vinnie's Bar, I was making three times what I had netted working for myself, and already hints were coming that I was standing at the peanut machine. Mack Silverman liked me, Carlos the bartender told me that, and I always believe what a bartender says. Mack sent me out to his tailor and I got a closetful of \$300 suits, with the rest to match. The coats were even made to fit around a shoulder holster, and unless you were looking very closely, a gun couldn't be detected. In the pocket of one suit was \$10,000, with a note that said: "Buy yourself a couple of marksman medals."

I moved into a flat in Mack Silverman's apartment house on the

same floor as Mack. Fran's apartment on one side of Mack, mine on the other. And a private elevator that went only to his floor. I had gotten the nod from Mack, and everybody from the cop on the beat to the alderman of the ward knew it.

The only thing I regretted at this point was the years I had wasted slugging it out trying to run an honest joint, battling against both sides until I got squeezed out like toothpaste out of a tube. Big Mack Silverman might have been simply protecting a position when he ran me out of business for not toeing the mark, but in doing it he had done me a favor, a *big* favor.

One thing worried me. I couldn't keep my eyes off Fran, no matter how hard I tried, which I'm afraid wasn't very hard. Sticking close to Mack like I did, it was unavoidable that I stick close to Fran as well. She was always sitting on his lap, or nibbling on his ear, or massaging his neck, and Mack was like a big, musclebound cocker spaniel in her hands. He was nuts about her. Here was a doll who knew men, and how to handle them.

My work wasn't hard, but it was exacting. I wasn't to allow a mistake like the one that made the job opening I had filled. Mack got the word from the cops that the hoods had been from out of town, that there was no way of tying them in with anyone who might have wanted Mack Silverman out of the

way. The grapevine brought Mack more information. The word was that they were brought in by a syndicate from Columbus and that after Mack was gone, they'd planned to take over his operation. It wasn't an original idea. Eventually, Mack got the name of the man back of the thing and called me into his office one day.

"Vinnie, you might remember when I got plugged I told you my rewards didn't come as medals. Well, I've got a job for you and there'll be a bonus that goes with it. Little bonus of five grand." He laid his hands on the desk top and smiled at me.

"Five grand? For what?" I said.

"I like that," he said. "Independent! Now most of my boys would say 'when', not 'what'." He took a cigar from his humidor and offered me one, which I declined. "I want you to knock off a guy for me, Vinnie." He said it in the same tone he might say, "Run down to the corner and get me a box of cigars." I had killed men before, not including the hoods in the hallway. In the war I had killed men, deliberately, but there was a difference, a *big* difference in shooting a guy in a war and standing in a plush office above a gambling joint getting instructions to kill a man.

"Don't you want to know who he is, Vinnie?" Mack was smiling, the wet little eyes peeping through their slits.

"I haven't said I'd do it yet."

He wheezed until he began to cough. When he got over it, he looked at me, unsmiling, and said, "Don't be *too* independent, Vinnie."

I didn't answer.

"The guy's name is Murray. Willie Murray. He's from Columbus. He's the guy behind the shooting but he don't know I know that."

You can talk yourself into anything. Rationalizing, they call it. If I didn't do this job, as sure as the sun was coming up next morning, somebody would. I went to Columbus, I killed Willie Murray, and I came back. I had come up from the bush leagues to the majors. The only thing that bothered me when I had done it, was the ease of it, the lack of anything like remorse or conscience. Only a few butterflies in the belly.

I stopped downstairs in the club for a few minutes and watched the new comic, Jerry Minton. He was doing an Ed Sullivan bit "—Ladies and gentlemen, we've got a reely, reely big shoe tonight!" After that he went through Bing Crosby and Jimmy Stewart and a few others and then a stripper came on.

I went up in the elevator and into Mack's office.

"Heard the news on the radio just now!" he said. He came around from behind the desk and clapped me across the shoulders. "You're good, Vinnie. You're going places with me!"

"There's lots of places," I said, pouring myself a shot. "Atlanta, San Quentin . . ."

"Here, go out and have yourself a ball, Vinnie." Mack pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and handed me several. I didn't look at them. I stuck them in my own pocket. "You need some relaxation," he said. "I don't want to see you around before tomorrow."

I didn't go out and have a ball. I was tired and I went back to my apartment. I was opening my door, planning to read or watch TV a while, when somebody said, "Hi there. What are you doing all by your lonesome?"

I looked around. It was Fran. She was standing in the door of her apartment, just beyond Mack's. She had on what they call 'something comfortable'.

"Come on down and let me mix you a tall cool one," she said. "You look beat."

I should have listened to the warning bell. There was only one place in town that was out of bounds for Mack's employees, and that was Fran's apartment. She must have noticed my hesitation.

"Come on," she said. "He won't be back here for four hours."

I shrugged and walked down the hall. I'd never seen the inside of her apartment before. It was really something. It must have been some decorator's masterpiece.

"What'll you have, Vinnie?" Fran said, moving over to the bar



that stood in one corner. She knew how to move across a room.

"Whatever you're having. No—make it scotch on the rocks.

She poured the drinks and came over and sat beside me on the sofa. She must have flipped the hi-fi switch on her way over because something of Ellington's was seeping into the room. The scotch had a warm smoky taste as I let it roll around my tongue and down. Fran hadn't said anything, and neither had I, but it was a comfortable silence, as though we'd known each other all our lives and found no need for talking.

"He's not easy to work for," she said after a while. "Not as easy as he seems at first, is he?"

"I guess you're right."

"I know I'm right. I've been in this prison nearly four years." She lifted her glass and drank.

I looked at her in surprise. "I didn't know you felt this way about him. I thought you really went for all this."

She shrugged. I finished my drink and stood up. I was beginning to feel warm under the collar and I figured the time had come to get out of there.

Fran stood up quickly and put her hand on my arm. "Don't go yet, Vin—please."

Her hand stayed on my arm. I looked down at her and it was the most natural thing in the world to do what I had wanted to do since the first time I saw her. I kissed her.

And the way she kissed me she must have been thinking the same thing.

"Vin! Vin! Why did you wait so long? Why!"

It was all I could do to think, but there on the edge of my mind was Big Mack, and what would happen if he came in now. In a moment even that vanished from my mind.

That was the start of it. After that we took chances that no sane person would have taken, but we had to see each other, be together. There were times when she was with him, and I'd see those big hairy hands pawing her like she was part of the furniture, and I wanted to kill him.

In the following weeks I did a couple more routine jobs for Mack, jobs that carried nice bonuses.

I put the dough away because I had nothing to spend it on. In the back of my mind I was planning on pulling out one day, too, and I wanted a stake when I did.

One morning I was sitting at the bar talking to Carlos. Herbie stopped beside me. "Boss wants you," he said.

I followed him upstairs. Jerry Minton, the comic, had just said something that threw Mack into wild laughter. When he could talk, Mack turned to me and said, "He's a scream, ain't he Vinnie! A real scream!"

I shrugged. "I can take mimics or

leave them. I'd just as soon leave this one."

The comic hopped around the end of the desk, gave me a baleful look, then he dropped down on one knee and began to sing in his Al Jolson voice: "I'd walk a million miles for one o' your smiles, my Viiiinnie!"

I wanted to take a punch at the cornball but Mack and Herbie were bellowing with laughter and all I could do was stand there and glare at the jerk. After a while Mack pulled himself together and told the others to get out.

"Vinnie, I got a job for you. There's a guy on the south side that don't believe I run this town. He's bringing in slots, and you and me know we can't have that. It's against the law." He pushed a piece of paper across the desk. There was a name on it—Jake Morgan—and an address. "Herbie'll have a car for you this afternoon. You run over there and take care of Mr. Morgan."

This would be number four, but I wasn't notching my gun. I got a queasy feeling whenever Mack gave me a job to do. It wasn't fear, not for myself, anyway. I wonder if anybody—except a homicidal maniac—can kill another human being without some feelings. Still, it was no worse than that first time, and I still remembered how surprised I was then because the feelings weren't more intense.

I parked across the street from

the address Mack gave me that afternoon and I waited. I had Morgan's description, and I don't know whether the guy was dumb or simply misjudged the man he was up against, but he pulled into his garage like any other businessman coming home from the office. I levelled the gun over the sill of the car window and I squeezed off a shot.

I squeezed it off just as Morgan put his arms out and a little kid popped out of the side door of the house. The kid got outside just in time to see his old man die.

I don't know how long I drove. But it was after midnight when I got back to the club. Mack was gone for the night and I sat at the bar and had Carlos pour drinks for me. I forced the whiskey down, drink after drink, until I could barely see Carlos when he came to pour another.

"Vinnie, it ain't like you drinking so much," he said once.

"Go stuff it," I answered him.

Finally, the time arrived when I couldn't see Carlos. I couldn't see the mirror behind the bar, or the guy sitting next to me, or even the glass clutched before me.

But I could still see that kid coming out the side door. I'd never stop seeing him.

The next morning I had a head, but I came down from my apartment to Mack's to drive him to the club, the way I always did.

"Have a cup of coffee, you look like hell," Mack said. I sat down and drank a cup black. "That was a good job yesterday, Vinnie," he said. "Good. Clean. That's the way I like to see it."

"Morgan had a family. His kid saw it happen." I choked some more coffee down.

"So what? He wasn't able to identify the car or anything else." Mack poked a cigar out at me.

"That's not what I mean. I didn't know he had a kid. I wouldn't have done it if I had known that—"

The hand of a three hundred pound man is a large object in itself. With a little effort behind it, it can knock you winding, as I found out when I said what I did. I doubt if I would have done anything, but before I could find out, the door opened and Herbie and Jerry Minton came in, and after a while we all went downstairs and drove to the club.

I met Fran later on that afternoon. "I'm through," I told her. "I'm finished. I want you to come with me."

"Can we?" she said. "We'll need money."

"I've saved every dime and this stuff of yours—"

I took her hand and looked at the rings Mack had given her—"this stuff ought to bring in something. That is, if you want to go with me."

"You know I do!" she said quick-

ly. "It's—it's that I'm afraid—"

"Christ! I am too! I don't want to die any more than the next guy, but I'm pulling out!"

"When?"

I flicked a speck of dust off my trouser leg. "The first time it looks right. Maybe in a week. There's a big deal coming up next week and Mack'll be busy, maybe too busy to worry about us."

Fran slipped her arms around me and drew herself close. "I'll be ready. I'll be ready whenever you are, and I'll go wherever you say."

The nerves began that day. Now that I was going to make a move, a move that would infuriate Mack Silverman beyond anything that had been done to him before, the nerves started. I saw more of Carlos and more than once he quietly chided me about drinking too much. "Mack notices little things, Vinnie. He don't mind if you take a slug or two, but he likes his boys on their toes."

His boys. That was one of the things that bugged me. The idea of being somebody's 'boy'. Well, it wouldn't be for long.

One Friday Mack called me in. "It's just another job, Vinnie." He blew a fat smoke ring that wobbled across the desk and dissolved. He gave me a shrewd look. "I don't think there's no little kids that'll see this." I said nothing and he got up. I could almost hear bones crackling under the weight of him. "This is a special job, Vinnie.

Somebody I want to give a little surprise to. The guy thinks he's supposed to meet another guy out at a cabin on Pine Lake tonight. You know where that is?"

I nodded, beginning to feel the old butterflies again.

"Okay. But this meeting ain't exactly what the guy's expecting. You drive out there, take the dirt road off the highway, the road that goes down toward the dam. You stop, then you blink your lights twice. That's the signal. The guy thinks it's his contact, and he blinks back from the cabin. You get out and walk toward the cabin, but you keep off the road. There ain't no moon tonight, and it'll be dark. This guy will be on the porch of the cabin and he'll be smoking a cigarette if everything's okay, that's part of the signal. Take along the twelve gauge automatic. Let him have it as soon as you're close enough."

"Why—"

"Because I said to do it, Vinnie. This is something special with me." He waited, the cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth.

"What time?" I said.

"Nine. Nine sharp." Mack said. Then he smiled and draped his arm over my shoulder. "There's something extra for you tonight, Vinnie. Do this one right and the bonus goes up. Come on, let's go down and mingle with the customers!"

It was six o'clock when he gave

me the instructions. I went to a phone booth and tried to call Fran because we had planned to see each other and this would interfere with that. For a moment I thought about that; here I was, about to go out and kill a man, and what was I worrying about? Seeing a girl!

There'd be plenty of time for that later. Fran's phone didn't answer, and I went back to the club and had a meal and a couple of drinks. I tried Fran again but still no answer. I decided to wait until the job was done, then call her.

The job. The last one, the way I figured it. I felt the creeping sensation inside me, the dampness under my arms.

It was time to get started. The drive out to Pine Lake took about twenty minutes to half an hour. I drove easily out the expressway, took the crossover and went out the highway. It was several years since I'd been out to the lake and I passed the turnoff before I realized I'd gone too far. The sign was down and with summer gone, the dirt road was overgrown with weeds. I eased the Merc off the highway, and then I remembered that Mack had said it was one of the cabins down the dam road. I remembered years ago there had been a short cut to the dam, and I turned

I was fairly close when I parked. I sat in the car for several minutes. This would be the last time I'd kill, for Mack Silverman or for anybody around to find it.

else. I woke up nights with the faces of the men I'd killed staring at me out of the darkness. And there was always that kid, running out the back door, always the kid!

This one more, that would make enough for poker. Maybe then they'd leave me alone.

I reached out and blinked my lights, twice. I waited. Through the woods came two feeble blinks from the cabin. I got out, checked the twelve gauge shotgun, and started through the woods. It was slow going. There were several cabins along the lakeshore and I stopped when I reached the edge of the clearing. Through the slender pines I could make out the silhouettes of the buildings, all in darkness, closed for the winter.

And then I saw a flicker of light. Someone was standing on the porch of the cabin nearest me, smoking a cigarette. I moved out into the clearing, tipped the barrel of the twelve-gauge up, and squeezed the trigger. The silence blew into a million pieces. Birds screamed out over the lake. Something bounded off through the woods. I heard a gasping sound from the cabin and I moved forward cautiously. I took the flashlight from my pocket and holding the shotgun ready in one hand, snapped on the beam.

The cone of light fell on someone writhing on the ground. I started to fire again, realizing that I had fired from too far out the first time and

had not killed him. And then I stopped. The gun dropped from my hands. It was a woman on the ground, a woman wearing slacks, and before I ran to her I knew who it was. It was Fran!

"Baby! Baby!" I knelt beside her, holding the light on her pain-wrenched face.

"Vin—" Her breath came in little gasping jerks. "Vin—what—you called—meet you here—"

Me! What was she talking about, I called her? Fran gave a muffled cry, and then she went slack in my arms.

It hit me, the whole thing. It felt like a blow from a sledge hammer. *Special job, Vinnie. A little surprise for somebody . . .* And the court jester, Jerry Minton, the boy who could sound like Bing Crosby or Ed Sullivan or Vinnie Pratt. . .

I squatted there with Fran's body in my arms, tears falling unashamedly. I looked up and I saw beams of bouncing light stabbing through the woods, coming from the direction of the highway. I eased Fran to the ground and I picked up the gun and trotted off through the woods. Whoever was coming—Mack's boys or the cops or whoever, would find only Fran. I ran through the woods toward the old road and the car. The branches tore at me, I stumbled again and again, but I got up and kept going. There were six shells still in the gun and I only wanted to get as far as the Zebra Club.

*The detectives, Eckert and Fowler, sat in the shabby hotel room and waited for Zoda. Eckert stared at the girl, Zoda's girl, smooth, beautiful and bored . . . and his eyes glinted with hatred and disgust.*

## THE FAITHLESS WOMAN

BY

CARROLL MAYERS



As we started for the garage, I suddenly stopped, patting my pockets. "Be right with you," I told Steve. "Forgot my cigarettes."

Cutting through the locker room, I went back to Captain Horan's office. His craggy brows arched quizzically at my return.

"I couldn't say this before, sir," I said, "but I'd like to take Zoda alone. Things may get rough and Eckert has a kid."

Horan's gaze was shrewd. "That the only reason?"

"No, sir."

"Eckert's trouble?"

I nodded. "Basically—from the angle of a faithless woman—the set-up suggests what Eckert went through last month. He's still

"So we spoon-feed him?"

"That's not what I mean, sir—brooding over it."



Horan nodded. "I know what you mean, Fowler. Why rub salt in a wound?" He pushed aside a sheaf of reports. "I know; Eckert is taking his wife's desertion hard. I can sympathize with that, and as long as it doesn't affect his work, there'll be no complaint. But we've all got a job to do. Assignments come up. Eckert happened to draw this one with you."

I said, "But I can take Zoda myself. I don't need Eckert."

Horan went back to the reports. "It's set up, Sergeant," he said flatly. "You and Eckert. I suggest you get on with it."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, sir," I said. I left the office, went back to the garage.

Steve had already checked out an unmarked sedan. I climbed in beside him and he tooled the car from headquarters, eased into traffic.

"Took you long enough," he muttered.

"I ran into Carmody. You know Carmody, always with a gag."

"Yeah, mostly lousy." Steve swung the sedan around a corner. "The Tremont?"

"That's right."

"Crummy dump. Zoda must really be laying low since he hit town."

"Maybe that's why the dame is blowing the whistle," I said. "Not enough excitement."

Steve spat out the window. "Maybe. Or maybe she's just tired of the guy, got somebody new to sleep with."

I gave him a sidewise glance; he was sitting hunched over the wheel, staring straight ahead, lean jaw bunched.

I fired a cigarette. "Afterward, how about some bowling?" I asked him. "I've been working on my back swing. I think—"

He wouldn't be switched. "What's the name of this broad?"

"Lang. Wilma Lang."

"How long's she been Zoda's woman?"

"I don't know. A year, maybe two."

"Couple of years." A red light loomed and Steve kicked the brake pedal hard. "Even if she only wanted the bedding, they must've hit it off, going two years. How come all at once she decides to turn him in?"

I shrugged. "The reward, probably," I said. "Since that Denver killing, Zoda's carried a five-grand tag."

He spat again. "Mercenary bitch."

I frowned. "Unwind, fella. Regardless of what you think about the girl, Zoda's a gun-happy killer wanted in six states. We've got a chance to take him."

My tone pricked him; briefly, he met my gaze, unblinking. "So we'll do just that," he told me.

Neither of us spoke the rest of the trip across town. Steve parked the sedan on a side street next to the hotel. As he set the hand brake he glanced at his strap watch.

"Three o'clock?"

"As near as she could figure," I said. "When she phoned, she said Zoda would be out the early part of the afternoon, but expected to be back around three."

"She mention the room?"

"Five-O-eight."

Steve drew, checked his 38; I did the same. "It's one-fifty now," I said. "Let's get up there."

The desk clerk was a gray-haired oldster dozing over a racing form. Momentarily, I considered alerting him, decided against it. We bypassed the desk, rode the grubby automatic elevator. Five-O-eight was at the end of the hall. We flexed our rigging, set ourselves before I rapped. Zoda could have returned early.

He hadn't, but the girl was ready for us. She opened the door quickly, a lush titian-thatched figure in snug coral skirt, form hugging the blouse of white silk.

"You're the police?"

I indicated Steve as I flashed my buzzer. "Sergeant Eckert. I'm Sergeant Fowler."

She stepped back to allow us to enter. The room was drab, two straight-back chairs, the bed and a battered dresser comprising the furnishings. Steve checked the adjoining bath as I closed the door, leaned against it.

"Zoda's out per schedule?" I asked.

The girl smoothed her lips. "He went to see some guy. Something

about going to Florida."

"But you expect him back around three?"

"From the way he talked, like I told you."

Steve again eyed his watch, sat down on one of the chairs. "About an hour," he told me. "Maybe less."

The girl's full lips pouted as Steve settled. "Does it have to be here? Couldn't you take him down in the lobby?"

I caught the quirk of Steve's mouth. "You don't want to see Zoda again?"

She looked at him. "Mister, he's got a gun . . ."

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll be on either side of the door. Just let him in, then hit the bath."

She considered my assurance, then shrugged. "Just so you get him." She plumped down on the bed, carelessly crossed sleek legs, indifferent to the revealing hike of her skirt.

"How about a drink?" she went on. "There's a bottle around here someplace."

"No, thanks," I said, taking the other chair. I noted the distaste in Steve's eyes as he studied the girl.

"Suit yourself." The redhead patted at her hair, then checked her nails. "Only if he's not early, it'll be a drag, just sitting here."

Steve's tone was cool. "You're in a hurry to collect that five grand?"

She regarded him amusedly, deliberately recrossed her legs. "I've got plans for it."

"Alone?"

Her smile was suggestive as she smoothed the bed. "Not necessarily. A girl needs a change after awhile."

The disgust in Steve's gaze was naked now. "It figures," he muttered.

I said, "Easy, man—"

The girl cut me short; her thrusting breasts lifted as she finally tabbed Steve's repugnance. "Listen, cop," she flared, "I don't need any cracks—"

Steve's lips thinned. "Sure, you don't."

"If I want to shake Zoda, that's my business. I'm doing you guys a favor—"

She broke off. Outside, the sudden whirr of the elevator echoed, then the snick of the door sliding back. Footfalls sounded down the hall.

Steve was still staring at the girl, a muscle jumping in his cheek. I shoved him into position, drew my .38. The girl slid off the bed, abruptly wide-eyed, uncertain. "Relax," I whispered. "If it's him, open up, then fall back fast."

It was Zoda; his knock came an instant later. "Okay, kid."

The girl turned the knob. Zoda entered the room with a big grin. "It's all set, doll. We leave tomorrow—"

That was as far as he went. I was flattened against the wall to his right, and even as the girl whirled from the door, the tail of Zoda's eye

caught my bulk. I yelled, "Hold it, Zoda!" but he ignored me, plunged to his knees, whipping free a heavy automatic as he rolled for position.

He never made it; I squeezed off two fast shots. Simultaneously, Steve lunged from behind the half-open door, also blasted. Zoda crumpled—and so did the girl, across the room.

My heart lurched. I'd been right on top of Zoda; I knew I hadn't missed. But Steve had also been only a step away, was a surer shot than I . . .

Zoda wasn't moving. I dropped beside the girl. She was writhing and moaning in agony, fingers digging into her belly.

I looked over my shoulder at Steve. "For God's sake, man. . . !"

He met my gaze stolidly, the tic in his cheek riotous now. "She was slow," he said. "You told her to get back fast, but she was slow."

"No, Steve . . . !"

His jaw set. "Yes."

My mind spun. Vaguely, I was aware of shouting outside. I got to my feet, a cold sweat drenching me. Steve stood spread-legged in the center of the room, looking down at the girl, his features now cold and impassive, devoid of all expression.

"She was slow," he repeated quietly.

He was still standing there as I stumbled into the hall to quiet the uproar, call an ambulance.

HE WAS ALONE in the squad room when they came in and told him she was dead.

It was a little after 8 A.M. He'd been on duty only ten minutes, going over mug shots on a jewelry grab with his partner, MacRae, when the lieutenant called Mac to his office.

"Hey, Phil, how come the personal invitation by phone?" Mac

ing lawbreaker could testify to the effectiveness of his sledge-hammer fists. Dark wiry hair receded over his wide forehead, flecks of gray subtly making their appearance at his temples. His keen brown eyes were set deep, astride the slightly deformed bridge of a twice-broken nose, which somehow added, rather than detracted, from the handsome masculinity of his tanned, an-

## MIS-FIRE

*He'd known all along that his wife was unfaithful to him. Yet when they found her naked, strangled body in the sleazy hotel room, he wanted just one thing . . . revenge on the man who'd done it.*

BY

NORMAN STRUBER

had questioned him sleepy-eyed, cradling the receiver.

He shrugged, and pried the lid from his coffee container. He was a lean man, just under the six foot mark, with wide shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, his body packed with muscular litheness. He had big hands, and the deep tan could not hide the battle-scarred knuckles, and many an arrest-resist-

gular face. Sometimes he looked older than this thirty-five years. He had been a cop for ten of them.

"You're supposed to be the senior partner in this firm," Mac said to him.

"But he wants to see 'junior'," Phil said leisurely, lifting the steaming container and blowing softly to cool it off.

"Yeah," Mac reflected apprehen-

sively. "Didn't sound like he wanted to hold hands, either."

Phil grinned at him over the container, a peculiar boyishness in the white-toothed smile that seemed to belie the sedate, experienced eyes. "Better go see what he wants, 'junior'."

He wasn't grinning now. Lieutenant Kirk and Mac stood across the table from him, grim-faced, expectant, the silence ringing heavily with the news they'd just broken to him. At first he just sat there staring up at them dumbly, his face slackened with bewilderment, as though he had heard the words but refused to let them penetrate beyond his ears, refused to let them sink into his skull and have meaning. He was a cop, and in a detached way he had become all too familiar with the emotional blow the stark words of sudden death could bring. But he couldn't be detached from this one. This one was different. This time it was happening to him. This was Denise.

This was his wife.

She was dead.

Murdered.

He shoved the coffee aside and stared up at them, his eyes trance-like, his fists bunching into hard steel mallets on the table top, his teeth clenched and his jaw muscles working in shocked anger. He said nothing, staring up at the two men.

"Jesus, Phil . . ." Mac muttered, his voice catching in his throat, ". . . I . . . I'm sorry . . . Holy

Mother, I'm . . . I'm sorry . . ."

Kirk lowered his eyes, solemnly wrapping his mouth around the tooth-scarred stem of his pipe.

Phil kept staring at them. "How . . . how did it happen?" he finally asked.

MacRae glanced at Kirk, waiting for the Lieutenant to take the lead, but Kirk gave him a short nod that told him he was Phil's partner and it was his job. Mac looked at Phil hesitantly, and Phil could see the sordid details in his eyes.

Mac had trouble with his voice. "Schwartz and Coleman . . . they . . . they took the squeal, Phil . . . 6:17 this morning. Phil . . . I . . . I didn't know until just now."

He drew in a long breath, and nodded, his fists opening slowly as he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table top. He buried his face in his palms, his voice deep and dull. "Go on, Mac."

He waited a long moment, until Mac found his voice again. "The squeal came from the room clerk over at the Allison. The floor maid was making her rounds, got no answer when she knocked on room 412 . . . so she opened it with her pass key. The maid saw . . . saw the body right off . . . screamed and all . . . then she got the room clerk, and . . . and then he phoned it in. Denise, she . . . she'd been strangled. She . . . she, uh . . . uh she wasn't. . ."

He drew his long fingers down over his face, his eyes staring down

blankly at the scattered mug shots. "All . . . all of it, Mac," he said weakly.

"She . . . she didn't have much on . . ." Mac broke off into silence again, paused to clear his throat, then went on. "Denise was laying across the bed . . . on . . . on her back . . . her head was back, hanging over the edge of the mattress . . . limp . . . stocking on the floor beneath her head."

Phil sucked in another long breath, his face heavily creased in a remorseful frown as he looked up at Mac. "Is . . . is that all of it?"

"She'd been hit, Phil," Mac said plaintively. "There was a bruise on her jaw. The report says there were no signs of a struggle, though."

He bit down on his lip. "The . . . the Allison, you said."

Mac reddened, his eyes not wanting to hold Phil's level gaze. "That . . . that's what the report said, Phil."

"I'm sorry, Phil," Kirk said genuinely, sighing. "It *was* the Allison."

He nodded slowly, knowing the infamous reputation of the Allison Hotel. Every bull on the squad, every patrolman in the precinct knew, or at least had heard, of the Allison. A cheap dive on the South side frequented by bookies, gamblers, smoky cellar club musicians drifters—all the high class, solid citizens. And he knew there was no need to ask what the hell the room maid was doing knocking on doors

at 6:17 in the morning. The Allison made a good percentage on transients, the guys who brought a broad up for only one thing and didn't take all day or night about it. The Allison squeezed good profits from her "quickies," and she kept the maids hustling, and so she had a big turnover in bed sheets. She squatted on Tenth and Market and she threw open her doors in a big smile for the good-time-Charlies, and the smile said bring your babe up, Charlie, and have a ball, the sheets are clean and ready.

The Allison was a big whore. Phil could see in their faces that Kirk and Mac knew it well.

There was no doubt in his mind that Denise knew it.

"We'll get the bastard, Phil," Kirk said gravely, puffing thick clouds to smoke. "We'll get the bastard that did this. Nobody murders a cop's wife in my precinct and get away wi . . ."

Phil pushed himself to his feet, the heavy frown still masking his features. "I'm going over there. I want to see . . ."

"Nothing to see," Kirk said. "It's cleaned up."

Phil stared at him angrily. "Why didn't you wait, damn it? You could have called me! You . . . I!"

"Take it easy, boy," Kirk said sympathetically. "The boys went over it . . . pictures and all. Your own wife, Phil . . . I couldn't see any sense in having you . . ."

"Damn it, Kirk! I'm no rookie!"



You could have at least asked me if . . . !"

"Easy, now. You know I was only thinking of your feelings, not your ability as a cop."

"Sure, Phil," Mac placated. "You . . . you can't blame him for that . . . I mean . . ."

"All right . . . all right," he said somberly. He looked at Kirk, despair in his eyes. "Morgue?" he asked simply.

Kirk nodded, conviction in his voice. "We'll wrap this one up in a hurry, Phil. Nobody murders a cop's wife in my precin . . ."

"I'm going down to see her." He picked up his hat.

"Look, Phil, you don't have to . . . right away . . ." Mac started.

He looked at Kirk. "You need a positive I.D."

"It can wait, Phil. Give yourself a chance to . . ."

"I want to see her now," he said sharply. He put on his hat and started for the door. "Then I'm going out and find the sonofabitch who murd . . ." He stopped at the door, all at once realizing that he was supposed to be a veteran cop. He had just balled out the lieutenant, accusing Kirk of treating him like a rookie, and here he was acting like an irresponsible hothead who was going to take the law into his own hands, his only motive being to seek revenge for the murder of his wife. He didn't feel above revenge—not by any means—but he was a cop and he'd just brushed

aside his superior, taking over a homicide case without officially being assigned.

He turned and faced Kirk squarely. "I want this one," he said firmly. "If it's all right with you."

He didn't expect any solid objection from Kirk, but he could see the hesitation in his eyes, the thick gray brows knotting pensively. "You don't have to, Phil. You know I wouldn't make you work at a time like this. After all . . . your own wife."

His eyes held Kirk's gaze steadily, his face avowed. "I want it." He watched Kirk puff the pipe, saw the corners of his mouth pull back in a proud little smile, his eyes blinking against the moisture that filmed them. Phil bit off the words slowly, emphatically. "I want to find the sonofabitch who killed my wife!"

Kirk took the pipe from his mouth, set his jaw decisively. "All right, Phil," he said finally. "It's yours."

Simple appreciation in his eyes, he said, "Thanks." And then another thought flashed into his mind. He'd almost forgotten. "What about her sister?" he asked. "Gail. Does she know?"

Kirk slowly shook his head. "We figured you'd want to break it to her."

He nodded dejectedly, knowing how badly Gail would take the news. "I . . . I'll go to the morgue first. Then I'll see Gail."

"I'll go with you, Phil." He

looked around at Mac. "We . . . we're still partners, you know."

He gave Mac a small appreciated smile. Mac was a big man, big and beefy, with a heart that needed a frame that huge to house it. He had a large round face, with big brown eyes that didn't have enough years of dealing with violence behind them to harden their look. He was still wet behind the ears, and Phil knew he was not as sharp as some, but he was going to make a decent cop. He'd been under Phil's wing for eight months, and Phil was pleased with the way they'd hit it off good, right from the start. "I want you with me," he said to Mac genuinely.

Carl Herz, the morgue attendant, stood on the other side of her, lifting the white shroud from her face.

"You . . . you want a better light, Phil?" the old man asked respectfully.

Phil shook his head no. There was no need for more light. It was Denise. No longer warm and radiant with life. It was Denise.

She looks asleep, he thought. There was no sheen to her long golden hair, and her skin did not have its warm white glow anymore, and her lips were not a soft moistened red anymore, but in the dimness, her eyes gently closed the way he'd seen them so many times, she might have been asleep. She was dead.

He bent over a little closer to her

face and saw the dark blotch on the side of her thin jaw, and the marks left on her graceful neck by the garroting nylon, and a thin cry squeezed through his lips. He lifted his hand and softly touched her silent lips, her cold cheek, her soft hair, then kissed her forehead gently. He clamped his eyes tightly shut, whispering to her, "Denise . . . Denise . . ."

He felt Mac's hand squeeze his shoulder reassuringly, and he straightened slowly, drawing air deeply into his lungs.

"Terrible thing, Phil," Carl muttered quietly, ". . . terrible . . . terrible . . ."

He stood there looking at her for a long time, remembering how lovely she'd looked last night before she left the apartment. Her red mouth full and sensual, smiling over gleaming white teeth, her flowing hair cascading fire over her smoothly rounded shoulders, the green eyes dancing with life, the new low-cut gown a clinging white glove around the supple lines of her body. He remembered the throaty bubbling sound of her laughter, and the soft swishing sound of her nyloned thighs as she walked to the door, and he remembered the door closing and then the crowding stillness of the apartment. He remembered all that, and it suddenly seemed as though it might have happened a century ago.

She was dead now.

He let out a long, heavy sigh,

and stepped back slowly. "All right, Carl," he said sullenly.

He watched the old man cover her face and then push the file drawer in carefully, quietly, unlike the way he'd seen Carl slam them closed dispassionately so many times, as though it was just so much more meat in the refrigerator. And he saw the guilty look on Carl's face, as though the same thought had suddenly filled his mind. He watched the old man shuffle across the immaculate tiled floor to his desk, his thoughts focusing on Gail, wishing that that part of his duty was also a part of the past.

Mac followed him down the corridor to the street, their heels resounding dully in the dimness.

It was one of the plushest apartment buildings on the North side, where the rent rate was high and the crime rate was low. Not like our precinct at all, Phil thought. He'd had the North side for two years once, and it had been soft. Soft as the thick carpet he stood on now, outside of his sister-in-law's apartment. Mac stood behind him silently, as he pressed the gold panel in the door jamb and listened to the familiar chime within. It was the first time for Mac. It was also the first time Phil had ever come without Denise.

The door swung in and Gail's maid smiled up at him in surprise. "Why Mr. Egan . . . !"

"Hello, Hattie," he said. He removed his hat and stepped inside, Mac following. "Will you tell Gail I'm here?"

Hattie's dark eyes stared up at him incredulously. "But, Mr. Egan, you know Miss Gail sleeps until twelve. And she worked so late last night."

"I wouldn't have you wake her if it wasn't important."

"But . . ."

"It's very important, Hattie."

She saw the somber look on their faces. "Yes, sir." She closed the door and walked swiftly across the expansive living room to Gail's bedroom.

Phil saw Mac's eyes appraise the expensively furnished apartment. It was imported modern, not the stiff-lined, cheap imitations Mac was used to calling "modernistic." There was a small fortune in couches and tables and plush chairs, with a light blue carpet that made the one in the hall seem like a gravel path. But then, Gail could easily afford it.

He felt perspiration oozing under his collar, his palms growing clammy in anticipation. He wiped his hands along his trousers, took a cigarette from the marble-topped table in front of the long couch. Mac didn't smoke, but he lifted what looked like five pounds of silver cigarette lighter from the table, snapped it into flame and considerately held it out for Phil. He inhaled deeply and waited.

He wondered if Mac knew that Gail was a night club singer. Not the two-bit kind flung all over the South end. Gail was tops, real class, and sang only in the better hotels and supper clubs. She'd even made TV a few times, and she'd told Phil and Denise only last week that her agent was negotiating Hollywood and Las Vegas contracts.

No, Mac never heard of Gail as a singer, he decided, otherwise he'd surely have mentioned it. Mac also couldn't have known that the torch had once burned brightly between him and Gail, until she introduced him to her baby sister. Gail knew he'd fallen hard for Denise, right from the start, but, loyal sister that she was, she accepted it, made no attempt to interfere. Gail was that kind of a girl. She was sweet and charming and unspoiled, but little of it had rubbed off on Denise. He often wondered how strange it all turned out. It was Gail who was the marrying kind, but she was the one who stayed single. He married Denise, but he had come to know that Gail still carried her feelings for him inside herself. He had seen it in her eyes everytime she looked at him, and he'd never really minded. She had never tried to make him feel guilty, it was just something she couldn't hide entirely.

Right now, he thought, we're the only family either of us has.

She came out of the bedroom hurriedly, her hands nervously tying her pink robe at the waist. The

blue eyes were not fully awake, her clipped brunette hair hastily combed. She had not wasted time with make-up, but with the smooth oval tan of her face and the casual, wind-blown effect of her hair, she was nevertheless very attractive. Like Hattie, she smiled surprise at first from across the room, but anxiety quickly came to her face when she saw Phil's solemnity. She kept staring up at his face as she came closer, the smile waning bewilderedly.

"Phil . . . Phil, what's wrong?" she said breathlessly.

It was not a time for apologies, but he wanted to give her a moment to collect her wits. "I'm sorry I had to wake you this way, Gail."

"Please, Phil . . . what . . . what is it, what happened?"

"It's Denise," he said hollowly.

Her hand snapped to her throat and she took in a quick breath, her eyes widening up at him, waiting.

"She's dead, Gail," he said quietly.

Stark shock cut off her breath, drained the color from her face, and then her eyes started to roll back and he rushed forward to catch her as her knees buckled. She didn't faint, but grasped his arms tightly, squeezing, her body suddenly trembling with sobs.

"Easy, Gail . . . easy, now," was all he could say.

He let her cry like that for a long while, Mac looking on helplessly, and when the sobbing and trem-

bling subsided he walked her over to the couch. She sat down and he gave her a handkerchief, and she took it and dried red-rimmed, tear-swollen eyes.

Mac pushed a chair over to him, and he sat down opposite Gail.

"What . . . what happened, Phil?" she asked feebly.

"It isn't pretty, Gail," he said glumly.

The blue eyes looked up, clearing. "Please . . . tell me."

He kept watching her face. "Denise was murdered."

Her face screwed up in a horrified frown. "Murd . . . murdered?"

He told her how the body was discovered, how he'd learned about it, and all the while his eyes appraised her face, watching how surprised and dumbfounded she was by it all.

"Oh, Phil . . . Phil, how awful for you. I . . . I don't understand. Who would do such a thing to Denise? What was she doing in a cheap ho. . . ?" She let the rest trail off, and he watched the flood of more than just normal pink blotch her cheeks, as she recognized the knowing look in his eyes.

He let the questions lay for a moment, wondering just how much Gail knew. "Denise was fooling around," he said grimly.

The blue eyes glanced away from him, she brushed at a stray lock of hair on her forehead, and then she leaned forward and nervously lifted

a cigarette from the table. He lighted it for her, then glanced at Mac. Mac stood there fumbling with his hat, his face a ball of red, and he too, looked away from him.

He swung his gaze back to Gail and went on in a low voice. "I've known about it for months, Gail, and I think you have, too. Women sense these things. Especially you, Gail, her sister . . . you used to be very close to her . . . you knew Denise like a book." He paused, waiting for the blue eyes to look up at him, and finally they lifted to his face, and Gail sighed, nodding despairingly.

"Gail . . . I . . . I tried to get her to come back to me," he went on. "I thought . . . maybe it was my fault. I asked her . . . tried to talk to her, but she just laughed at me . . . actually laughed at me. And sometimes she'd get angry, telling me she was sick of trying to live on a cop's salary. Oh, we were doing all right, but I guess it wasn't enough for Denise. Seeing what you had, Gail, well . . . well, I guess she kept thinking about all the nice things she was missing." He spread his hand, gesturing at the expensive furnishings. "Things she could have had if she stayed with you . . . or married someone . . . someone with means."

Gail closed her eyes for a moment, and leaned back on the couch tiredly, her voice quavering a little. "I . . . I tried to talk to her, too. I told her you were a good man,

Phil, and that was all that really mattered. Not money . . . nothing mattered but having a good man . . . and kids . . . that was everything."

"Denise didn't want kids," he said bluntly.

She pressed her lips together, a hurt expression coming over her face. "I know," she said, not wanting to look at him.

He turned his head toward his partner. "Mac, I guess you didn't know any of this."

"No," he said shyly. "I . . . I'm sorry, Phil."

"But you remember the way she acted at the Police Ball, though, don't you?" He didn't make it sound like a question.

"Yeah, Phil," Mac blushed. "I . . . I remember."

"There wasn't a good-looking cop she didn't make a play for. I . . . I thought I'd fall through the floor when she made that pass at the lieutenant." He paused, reflecting wistfully. "She . . . she was drunk . . . but going for the lieutenant like that . . ."

"Kirk's an all-right guy, Phil."

"Damn right, he is. That's why he let it lay, never said anything to me." He eyed Mac squarely. "But I guess there's no doubt in his mind about what Denise was doing at the Allison."

Again, Mac reddened. "No . . . no, I don't suppose so."

Phil squeezed the corners of his eyes wearily. "That . . . that's

what makes it so tough, Mac. It's hard not to feel partially to blame. I . . . I was going to ask her for a divorce . . . maybe I shouldn't have waited . . . maybe if I hadn't tried to hold on . . . maybe she'd still be ali . . ."

"Don't go blaming yourself, Phil," Mac broke in amiably.

He let out a long sigh, his voice heavy. "Yeah . . . I suppose it's silly. She's dead, isn't she?" Then his voice tightened, his eyes hardening. "But there's one thing I can still do for her."

He shifted his eyes to Gail. "When did you see her last?"

The sudden business-like sound of his voice startled her. She thought for a long moment. "Why . . . last Thursday, when you were here together."

"There were a lot of people here for cocktails, but Denise only seemed to notice one."

She flushed.

"Ray Foster," he said flatly. "Practically the entire time we were here, they were together. They didn't make any bones about disappearing into your bedroom, either. They took quite a while at it, too. I don't think anybody missed that caper."

She leaned forward. "Phil . . . you don't think he . . . ?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We're just starting on it. Foster seems like the best place to begin." He paused. "Band leader, isn't he?"

"Yes."



"How do you know him?"

"We . . . we've worked together. But not lately."

"Have you see him since Thursday?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

A puzzled frown formed on her face. "Yes . . . yes, I'm sure."

"Do you know anything about him? I mean, except that he has a band and you used to sing with him."

"I . . . I don't know what you mean, Phil. We . . . we just worked together once in awhile. He has a fine band and . . ."

"What kind of a guy is he?"

She set her jaw in a firm line. "Look, Phil, I don't know what your trying to . . ."

"I'm trying to do my job, Gail," he said a little harshly. "I want to do my job now, more than ever. I'm sorry, but I've got to ask you these questions."

She reached for another cigarette and chain lighted it. "Yes . . . yes, of course, Phil."

"What kind of a guy is this Foster?"

"Well, he . . . he's very good-looking, as you know, and . . . and . . . and I suppose many women are attracted to him."

"He does all right, you mean?"

She nodded sheepishly.

"Money?"

"He . . . he does very well. He's very popular in the hotels."

"I'll bet. He's the kind of a guy who'd make no bones about his assets to a girl like Denise. Is that right, Gail?"

"I wanted to get in touch with him. I wanted to tell him to stay away from my sister. I . . ."

"What about you, Gail? How do you feel about him?"

She drew deeply on her cigarette, then leaned her head back against the couch, a pained expression in her eyes.

"Gail?"

"At one time . . . possibly," she began reminiscently, "when . . . when you and Denise were first married. We were booked at the Regent together . . . he was very complimentary about my singing . . . he was very nice. I . . . I was no different than any of the others, I suppose. I found him very attractive . . . it seemed quite wonderful at the time."

"And now?"

"It's been over for years."

"Just friends, huh?"

Her eyes flashed at him.

"I just wanted to make sure, Gail," he explained quickly. "I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"Just friends," she said, her hands drawing into tight little fists, "but if he's done this to Den . . . !"

"Have you ever been to his place, Gail?"

"No."

"But you said . . ."

"Never at his place. I don't even know where he lives."

"Then he uses hotel rooms?" She reddened. "I . . . I suppose so."

"The hotel where he happens to be working?"

"I . . . I don't think so."

"South side hotels, then. Places like the Allison."

"I . . . I suppose so. I really don't know his habits, Phil." Her brow wrinkled quizzically. "But even if Denise was seeing him, why would he want to do a thing like that? My God, why would he want to kill her?"

He stood slowly, shrugging. "I don't know. Maybe Denise made demands. Something like that."

"But he knows her husband is a detective. Wouldn't that alone be enough to frighten the thought of . . . of murdering her out of his mind?"

He looked at Mac, who had been standing there listening pensively. "Maybe Foster got panicky. Denise could be damn insistent. Guys do crazy things when they get panicky."

Mac nodded, shifting his heavy weight.

Phil cocked his head to one side, eyeing Gail. "Seems as though we've got the poor guy convicted already, haven't we?"

She glanced down at her hands, not saying anything, then started to rise.

"We'll let ourselves out, Gail," he said.

The blue eyes raised to his, con-

cernedly. "You'll keep in touch?"

He nodded. "I'll keep in touch."

She smiled at him condolently and he returned it, and then he nodded Mac toward the door.

They rode the elevator down in silence, Phil thinking about the conversation with Gail, the band leader, Ray Foster, and planning what his next move would be.

When they got to the lobby, Mac said, "First we check out Foster, right?"

"Right now, I guess it's the best we've got." Mac followed him to the phone booth and together they checked the directories, finding that Ray Foster wasn't listed. "Wants to keep his address a deep dark secret," Phil muttered, stepping into the booth and dialing the C.I. office. He waited while C.I. checked with Motor Vehicles, then hung up after they'd given him the information.

"A Jag, an Alfa Romeo, a Lincoln Continental," he told Mac, "and 2100 Fairview."

"Poor guy," Mac said, jotting down the address. "That's up near the city line. Way out of our territory, Phil."

"No harm in asking questions. We can worry about the formalities later on."

Mac nodded. "Let's go."

"No. We'll save a lot of time if we split up. It might look bad for Foster, but let's not put all our eggs in one band leader. He could be clean."

"Gee, I don't know, Phil. After the way you just stuck all the pieces together . . ."

"I want to give him a chance to talk."

"Yeah, but if he's hot he could give you trouble."

"Nothing I can't handle. I want you to give the Allison a rundown. Don't miss anything . . . check it all out with Coleman and Schwartz, I want details . . . pictures, lab report, the works."

"When do we compare notes?"

"I'll meet you in the squad room, say . . ." he glanced at his watch. ". . . around noon. You've got three hours."

"I should make it."

"Good. I'll see you then—with or without Foster."

Mac eyed him seriously. "Don't take any chances, Phil."

"I won't. Get going."

"Good luck."

"Yeah. You, too."

The cab let him off at a lush garden apartment layout, nestled among manicured trees and shrubs in an estate-like setting. Morning sun slanted down warmly on his back as he walked directly up the path to Foster's apartment. Foster, too, had chimes, designed to wake gently, Phil mused, as he held his finger on the white button in the door jamb, ringing them ceaselessly. He took his finger away when the door finally opened.

Foster wore baby-blue pajamas,

monogrammed across the pocket. His silky blond hair was tousled and his gray eyes squinted painfully in the sunlight. He smacked his lips drily, as though he'd been chewing on sour cotton puffs.

"Uhn?" he managed to say, half asleep.

Phil didn't say anything. He dropped his big hand on Foster's chest and shoved him inside, stepped in after him and kicked the door shut.

Foster woke up. "Hey, what the . . . !"

Phil woke him up some more with a backhand across his face. But not too hard, not enough to tear flesh, just enough to rock him back on his heels and jostle his brain.

"Hey . . . !" Foster gingerly fingered his reddened cheek.

"Look hard, Foster. You know me."

Foster gaped, recognition widening his eyes.

"The name's Egan," Phil sneered.

Foster's voice crackled. "Den . . . Denise's . . ."

"Husband," Phil supplied.

Foster took a quick barefooted step backwards, his lips fumbling for words. He ran his hand through his hair, his eyes darting around, looking for someplace to hide, anywhere. He gulped. "Yeah, hey . . . hey, uh, let's . . . let's talk this over like . . . like civilized . . ."

"Sure, Foster. Sure, we'll talk it over."

A nervous smile twitched across Foster's face. "Yeah . . . yeah . . . we'll be sensible about this . . . we'll . . ." His eyes caught the bar and he whirled toward it as though his life depended on it. His bare feet padded behind the bar and he quickly grabbed a bottle and half-filled a highball glass. He jerked the glass to his mouth and tossed off most of it.

Phil looked around the enormous one-roomer, surveying the two divans, several stuffed chairs, fireplace, large walnut desk, baby grand, the king-sized bed at the far end, visible beyond partially drawn drapes. He found it cozy-looking, very livable. He liked it.

"Wh. . . what are you drinking, Egan?"

He scoffed at Foster's attempt at friendliness. "Like two old buddies at a reunion, huh Foster?" he said sarcastically. He eyed him. "We were going to talk."

Foster wet his lips. "Yeah . . . yeah . . . we . . . we'll have a nice little talk, like two grown men, won't we?" He waved the bottle. "Nothing wrong with a little drink to start with."

"Put it down, punk!" Phil growled.

Foster's hand trembled, the bottle clunking against glasses as he nearly dropped it on the bar top. He wiped his hand across his mouth, saw the unfinished drink and drained it, swallowing hard. He ran his tongue over his lips.

"Yeah . . . well . . . uh . . . how . . . how *is* Denise? She . . . she's fine I ho . . ."

"She's dead, Foster."

Foster's jaw dropped open, and froze that way for a long moment.

"Huh?"

"Dead!"

"D . . . dead?"

"Murdered, you bastard!"

Foster grabbed the bar with both hands, steadying himself. "Oh . . . oh, no . . . Christ, no . . ."

Phil walked closer to him, watching his reaction. "She was strangled late last night. Her body was found in the Allison a few hours ago."

"The . . . the Allison?"

"Room 412. Sound familiar? Room 412, that special little room of yours. That's where you take them all, isn't it, scum? That's where you took Denise. That's where you took my wi . . ."

"Hey . . . hey, look . . ." Foster shot his hand up placatingly.

"Don't lie to me, punk!"

"All . . . all right, okay, so I took her there a few times, but, Jesus, not last night. I swear not last night. I was here . . . so help me I didn't budge out of here. Tuesday nights I stay home, go over the arrangements for the band."

"Anybody see you here?"

"What?"

"Witnesses, jerk. Anybody see you here last night?"

"Well, no . . . no, but what the hell, man . . ."

"You're sure no one saw you?" Phil pressed.

Foster spread his hands in mid-air. "Well, Jesus, who's going to see me? I worked alone. I always work alone."

"What about the Allison?"

"I was here all night. I just told you. I swear I wasn't *near* the Allison. Ask the room clerk, ask the elevator boy."

"There's the back way, you son-of-a-bitch! Through the alley, then the service elevator. You've got a deal set up with the room clerk. He doesn't even know your real name. You pay him off for the tight lip, you slimy . . . !"

"Okay . . . okay, that part is true. But not last night. I . . . I swear it . . . I swear I didn't have anything to do with . . ."

"Get your gun, Foster," he said bluntly.

Foster blinked. "My . . . my gun?"

"A .45 Colt automatic, in case you've forgotten."

Foster squinted at him, puzzled.

"Nice of you to be a law-abiding citizen by registering it."

"But what . . . what's the gun got to do with . . ."

"Get the gun!" he ordered gruffly.

He stared at Foster menacingly, watched as Foster hesitantly started for the desk, stopped before he got there and wheeled around with his fists clenched at his sides, trying to

muster a determined look on his face.

"Look, Egan, you might be a cop, but I know something about the law, too. You're supposed to have a search warrant. You can't come barging in here like this. I didn't have anything to do with your wife's death. You can't go pushing me arou . . ."

Phil pushed him aside and ambled over behind the desk, knowing now where Foster kept the gun. He looked at the stupid expression on Foster's face, as he took out a handkerchief and wrapped it around his hand.

He found the key under the blotter pad. The gun was in the bottom left drawer beside a box of cartridges. He checked the clip and found it fully loaded. He carefully pumped a cartridge into the chamber and thumbed the safety on. Bewildered, Foster watched him as he opened the middle drawer part way and placed the .45 in it. He closed the other drawers, then looked up at Foster.

Foster lifted his hand shakily, pointing a finger at him, a frightened-animal look breaking across his face. "You . . . you're grinning. Wh...why're you grinning like that?"

"You're getting the point now, aren't you?" Phil walked over to him. "I'll spell it out for you, jerk. I've been tailing you for weeks. You and Denise. You and that lousy slut. She was good for only

one thing, and you found that out fast enough, didn't you? But don't think you were the only one, jerk. Not by a long shot. Only you were smarter than the others, so god-damn smart that you gave me a tailor-made set-up. That Allison deal of yours was handy, real handy. I didn't think you'd have an alibi for last night, and we just made sure of that, didn't we?"

Foster stared at him, speechless.

Phil rubbed his jaw pensively. " 'Course, I was kind of stupid myself, you know. I should have stuck with Gail, right at the beginning. We were going great. And maybe you were, too, jerk, but you're dead as far as she's concerned, now. I just made sure of that." He sighed wistfully. "Yep, I could have had Gail a long time ago. But Denise . . . oh, that Denise, she kept working on me until she had me where it hurts. Those tight dresses she wore, and that come-on when I'd call for Gail . . . yeah, she was something, all right." He paused, a matter-of-fact expression on his face. "But that's all over. Now there's Gail to think about. She'll have me, too, you know. And her bank account won't be so hard to take, either. Naturally, it'll take a little time until she forgets all this. But no hurry. No hurry, at all. Maybe five, six months, then it's forgotten . . ."

*"You . . . you killed your own wife?"* Foster said hatefully.

"It was easy to sound like you over the phone, jerk. Besides, Den-

ise was so anxious she wouldn't have noticed if it was your grandfather talking."

Foster narrowed his eyes. "Why you . . . you lousy murdering . . .!"

"I was waiting for her . . . in the closet. I came up the back way, like you. The witch couldn't even wait. She was half undressed two seconds after she came in. She started to yell when she saw me, and that's when I had to hit her. The rest wasn't exactly the pleasantest thing I've done, so I'll spare you the details."

Phil saw him eyeing the phone now, could see the wheels spinning in the towsled blonde skull. "Don't try it," he said, grinning. "You'll have a better chance my way."

Foster was sweating profusely, dark blotches spreading over the baby-blue pajamas, hate and fear contorting his face.

Phil gestured toward the opened drawer, the .45. "Go ahead," he said. "It's all yours."

Full meaning registered on Foster's face, his eyes boring at Phil. "Sup . . . suppose I don't."

He unbuttoned his jacket, let it swing back over the .38 resting in the holster clipped to his waist. "You'd get it anyway. I just stick the .45 in your hand afterwards. Go for the gun, and at least you've got a chance."

Foster swallowed. "Yeah . . . yeah, thanks." He stood there pumping his fists nervously. "You

... you must have slipped up somewhere, Egan."

Phil grinned. "Nothing big, nothing we can't handle as we go along."

"Even . . . even if you are a cop, you had to slip up somewhere. You know that don't you? You . . . you can't get away with . . ."

"Time's running out, jerk. Make your choice." He lifted the .38 from his waist and let it rest at his side.

He watched Foster suck in a quivering breath and stare over at his own gun, his body trembling again. Phil had doubts a few moments ago, but he knew now that Foster was going to do it. Foster was scared to hell, but he was also angry, and he was going to do it. It was going to be perfect, just the way Phil wanted it.

Foster started out slowly, stiffly, as though he was expecting a bullet to come crashing into his back. But, of course, Phil had no intention of doing it that way.

Phil brought up the .38 and held it levelled at Foster, waiting.

Foster paused briefly behind the desk, his eyes measuring the gun. And then he dove for it.

Phil wanted it to be just right, he wanted to wait just another second, until Foster's hand was on the gun. Just another second before he squeezed off.

Just that one second.

The .45 came up fast as Phil's gun misfired. The surprise of the sharp click in his hand caught him

off guard, another instant's delay before he could pump the trigger again. He got the shot off, but he was already spinning across the room with the impact of the .45 slug, pain suddenly tearing at his insides, his ears bursting with the roar of the explosions.

He hit the floor hard and felt the gun skitter out of his hand. He cursed against the pain and tried to push himself off his stomach. He flopped over on his back, staring up, the ceiling miles over his head. He dragged his hand to his side, sickening at the feel of the warm, sticky ooze over his fingers. He lay there grimacing, sucking in air frantically, then managed to prop himself up on one elbow.

His eyes searched the floor dizzily for his gun, caught sight of a blurry bare foot kicking it away. His eyes closed on him, and then he heard a voice dimly, and then the sound of a phone being cradled. When he looked up, the blue pajamas stood next to him, and finally Foster's face came into focus. He saw the .45 in Foster's hand, dangling close to his face, the stench of cordite clawing at his nostrils.

He swallowed thick saliva and gritted his teeth. "Get . . . get it over with," he grunted feebly. "Shoot, damn you!"

Dully, he saw Foster kneel down and press a towel against his side, felt his hand lifted and placed over the towel. "I may be a heel, Egan . . . maybe the world's biggest. But



there's one thing I'm not." Foster stood, looking down at him. "I'm not what you are, Egan."

His eyes fell to Foster's feet. He did not want to look at him.

"You just made your first slip, Egan. There's got to be others."

He slid back to the floor, staring up. Yes, he knew, there had to be other slips. He thought of the way he'd set it all up for Mac and Kirk. The big act in the squad room, and then at the morgue, and then steering the questioning of Gail toward Foster's guilt, for Gail's and Mac's benefit, and all the weeks of watching, and the planning, and the waiting. Yes, he'd expected he would have to do some covering up here and there, and he figured he could have gotten away with it. But not now, not after the thorough way the boys would check him out, after the story Foster gave them.

He wondered how Mac would take it, and then he bit down on his lip, because he knew.

He thought of Gail, and all that

might have been, and he knew now that it could never have been the way it was in the beginning.

And then he thought of Denise, and the way she had laughed at him when he asked for a divorce. She was jealous . . . so jealous of Gail. Denise wanted him to sweat. She would give him a divorce some day, but she wanted him to sweat. But he couldn't wait. He couldn't chance Gail's marrying someone else. And then he thought of Denise in the hotel room, her fright at seeing him, her dying on the bed, her desperately futile attempts to pull the strangling stocking from her throat, and maybe he should have let go, maybe he should have let her live. He thought of the way she looked at the morgue . . . so still . . . so innocent . . . and he knew he was sorry.

He heard the distant wail of a police siren and he closed his eyes, waiting. The pain became a dull throb. His breathing came easier. He knew he was going to live . . . . . for a little while.

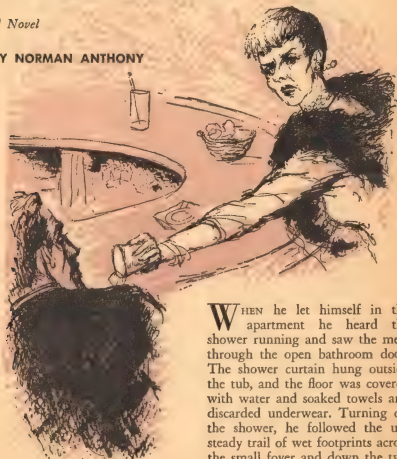


*She was an actress and he was a writer. Their marriage was held together by sex and poverty. It couldn't last and it couldn't end . . . except in violence.*

# SET-UP FOR TWO

*A Novel*

BY NORMAN ANTHONY



WHEN he let himself in the apartment he heard the shower running and saw the mess through the open bathroom door. The shower curtain hung outside the tub, and the floor was covered with water and soaked towels and discarded underwear. Turning off the shower, he followed the unsteady trail of wet footprints across the small foyer and down the two steps into the living room and

glared at the naked woman sprawled on her back on the low studio bed.

She made him think of a drowned cat, and that's what she was, he thought grimly; drowned in gin and self-pity. The thin, deeply-lined, once-beautiful face was turned to one side, the sullen mouth slack like a dead cat's, the abandoned pose just as feline. He stood looking down at her, and in spite of his anger and disgust, he couldn't help the stirring in his loins. She still had the soft body of a young girl, in startling contrast to the dissolute face and scrawny neck, the skin pink and smooth and glistening with dew from the shower, one slender, ringless hand in an ironic virginal gesture, lying between her thighs.

The hate and disgust died as desire came to life, and ignoring the sleepy snarl of protest he took her roughly in his arms, but when he got up he caught the gleam of triumph in her slitted green eyes and the twisted, mocking smile, and he knew she had been waiting for him. A rag and a bone and a hunk of sex, he muttered to himself in sudden revulsion; and as coy as a man-eating tigress.

She sat up in bed and there was even nakedness in the way she lit a cigarette and sipped from the half-finished drink on the bedside table, and again she made him think of a cat; a cat licking its paws after a hearty meal.

A feeling of despair rose within him just as desire had, and he sank down in the chair by the window and stared at the blank sheet of paper in his typewriter. She had been like that ever since their marriage; the feline lure, the snarling, catlike reaction, the pretended angry resistance, and when it was over, the purring satisfaction. It was hate, not love; rape, not fulfillment, but it had held them together like their poverty. They were two frustrated animals in a cage of their own making.

He watched her with a morbid curiosity as she got up and finished her drink in the drained silence. Her body was the only youthful thing she had left, and she displayed it, artlessly, like a child with a new dress, utterly unconscious of the fact that it would soon be as dissolute as her deeply lined face. She had taken only a few puffs on the cigarette, but she left it to die on the ashtray as she usually did, and when she returned to the bathroom he shuddered; their after-maths were always like that; cold, dead ashes.

Their first affair had been the only romantic one, and he had thought it was love then, as he had so often before, but it hadn't taken him long to find out that it was just lonesomeness and the hunger for companionship and a woman's warm body, and the rebound from the only real love he had ever known, a love he had squandered

like everything else he had ever owned. He had tried to blame it on the war, and his disillusionment and unrest on his return, but it hadn't been that; the war had been just another excuse for further profligacy and Ruth had finally divorced him. He shook his head with a sardonic grimace; now Connie was Mrs. Barry Middleton—until death do us part!

His eyes went to the desk on the other side of the room, and the drawer where the German Luger he had brought home lay hidden under a pile of old manuscripts. In his deepest moods of depression he had been tempted to use it, but, curiously enough, the thought of suicide always brought a last glimmer of hope that his failure was only temporary.

His remorseful gaze came back to the sheet of paper stuck in the typewriter; it had been there for a week, as blank as his mind, and he knew it would stay that way. All he needed was another mystery like the others he had turned out so easily, but his life was as overdrawn as his last novel. He had finished it nearly a year ago, but the advance royalty had long since vanished, as had the money his agent had loaned him, and the book wasn't even published yet!

Now he was face to face with his own personal mystery and without a clue to the solution of it. It was ironic; he was in the same position as the doomed souls he wrote

about, and caught in his own trap. He got up wearily; he wouldn't be able to work now even if he wanted to. The only chance he had to write was when Connie was out on her daily rounds of manager's offices.

He let out a heavy sigh as he looked at the framed theatrical photograph on the bookcase, with her flamboyant autograph scrawled across the corner of it, and remembered the first time he had seen her on the stage. It seemed ages ago, and yet it was only five years, just before Ruth had divorced him. Connie had been the last straw.

His mind went back to the night he and Bob Riva, an artist pal had seen the play; Connie had created quite a sensation in it, portraying the role of a dipso, but he hadn't known then that it wasn't an act and that she was playing herself. He and Bob had dropped into Sardi's for a drink after the show and she had come in with one of her current suitors and he had been introduced to her. She was a startlingly attractive woman, despite the dissipation that showed on her face, but her aristocratic features and heavy makeup offset the hardness, and there was a physical allure about her that fascinated him as much as her brazen sophistication. She used both with a deliberate insouciance and her green eyes heightened the effect. They were laughing when she said, "I think I'd like to have an affair with you," and he had laughed too, but

with an inner sense of excitement.

They had gone on to a couple of nightclubs after that, and dancing with her, the physical attraction was like an electric current. That had been the beginning of a dizzy courtship and during an alcoholic weekend they had gotten married. It had been gay as hell at first and her moving into his little apartment had been a great lark with a nightly round of parties after the theatre. Their mornings became hangovers, and she treated his writing as a lark, interrupting his work continually with "coffee breaks," as she called her drink mixing, and flaunting her nakedness at every opportunity, but as the day wore on her gaiety became strident and their drunken quarrels lasted until she had to leave for the theatre. It was the only thing that saved both of them; the thrill of each performance and the applause revived her like a drug, and when she came home her gaiety had returned.

It was a vicious circle, getting wider and deeper, and he finally realized he had married a confirmed alcoholic. While the show was running he tried to write a little in the evenings, but his work had already been effected and his income along with it. He found himself drinking almost as heavily as she did, and when the play closed it became a living nightmare. A nightmare of sex and poverty holding them together; even though he hated her, her flesh drew

him like a magnet, and he couldn't understand it. Her body was perfectly formed but there was nothing voluptuous about it, except that her breasts were full and upthrust for such a slender figure, and the rest of her was no different than any other female.

Maybe it was in the pigmentation of her skin; there was a curious, petal-like softness to it, a faint, rosy pallor that gave her body a fresh, dewy surface like a Boucher nude. Or perhaps it was the sharp contrast between that and her dark, almost decadent face. It was a fleshly anachronism, as if only her face had been exposed to the years and the elements.

He stared at the abstract portrait hanging on the wall that Riva had done of her when they were first married and just before the play had closed; it was a wild conglomeration of raw-colored cubes, and he had always wondered why Connie's personality had given the artist that impression. He smiled grimly; if Riva had ever caught her in one of her naked moments he might have seen her in a different light!

It took him back to the night the show closed. Connie's final performance had been played up in all the gossip columns; she had gaily tossed a bottle of gin into the audience, and her strip-tease act was only saved from pandemonium by the hasty lowering of the curtain. At four in the morning she had ar-

rived at the apartment with the more hardy members of the company, including the beetle-browed actor who had played the lead, and he had suspected then, from her drunken embraces that they had been more than just members of the same cast.

The celebration had lasted three days and Connie had ended up in Doctor's Hospital where she held court for a week, her room filled with flowers and convivial friends. She deserved a good rest, she told him, and she wasn't even going to consider another play until she found the right script. What she didn't know was that she was through in the theatre; that had been her last good part. She had hit the skids the way she had hit out at life, and managers could no longer trust her. Anger and bitterness had been added to drink, and he had come along just in time to reap the whirlwind, and to be included in the blame for her downfall. No wonder she couldn't get a part when she had no clothes to wear and had to live in squalor with a drunken failure!

Those scenes on her return from the theatrical rounds were always reminiscent of her last play, getting more and more violent as he in turn angrily accused her of being the reason for his failure, ending up in gutter epithets and throwing anything she could lay her hands on. He knew it would be the same when she came out of the bath-

room, and with a convulsive shudder he left the apartment again.

He walked down the street to Pete's, and was sitting at the bar staring moodily at his reflection in the dusty mirror when Ruth came in. He wasn't surprised to see her; her studio was in the same block, and curiously enough, she was still part of his life, even if it was only compassion on her part. She was like that; as forgiving as she was resolute, and the fact that she felt sorry for him was what hurt the most. It had given him a strange, little boy feeling toward her; every time he saw her now he wanted to bury his head in her lap and tell her how sorry he was.

She'd been responsible for whatever success he'd had; being an artist she understood his discouragements and his lack of confidence, and she had cheered him up and nursed him along until he'd sold his first book. After that it had been easy, but he couldn't take success any better than he could failure; he'd started drinking again, and then he'd met Connie and that had completed his demoralization.

He was so glad to see her he had difficulty keeping the tears back, but he managed a feeble smile and waved to the bartender. "Joe, a drink for my favorite wife."

"How's it going?" she said, and he knew he hadn't fooled her any; he never had.

"It's hell," he admitted. "A nice private little hell, with hot and cold

running temperments. I couldn't have done a better job if I'd written it for one of my own villains. A self-service job," he grimaced.

"She's still drinking?"

"With added refinements. Phenol-barbital and aspirin."

"Hasn't psychiatry helped her any?"

"Dick? He gave her up long ago, just as A.A. did." He smiled wryly.

"She's a worse basket case than I am, Ruthie. I know I'm a bum, but she still thinks she's Camille."

"Why don't you get out? Before it's too late," she added, after Joe had served the drinks.

He made a despairing gesture. "Get out where? Dispossessed is more like it. I'm already four months behind in the rent."

"What about the new book?" Isn't it coming out soon?"

"I've already drawn down on it, and I owe Mike Ferris my life. He's been advancing me money for six months."

"Maybe he can sell it to the movies."

He gulped down his drink; it was his fifth, and he laughed sardonically. "Maybe I can sell Connie to the movies. That's all she talks about when she's slightly coherent. The hell with Broadway! If I had some decent clothes, I could go out to Hollywood and make a new start." His laughter was as false as his cynicism. "As a zombie in one of those horror pictures!" The laughter died and he stared at Ruth

in honest bewilderment. "You know, it's strange, but I feel sorry for her. Maybe it's because I'm in the same boat. It takes a drunk to understand a drunk. She's a schizo; she still has delusions of grandeur." He grinned crookedly. "At least I never had that. It must be tough for her; after all, she was a damn good actress, and a star only a few years ago."

"She was just playing herself." There was no venom in Ruth's voice, just blunt honesty, and now it was directed at him. "You're a strange man, Barry Middleton. You always feel sorry for the wrong people, including yourself. Connie's not only an alcoholic, she's an utterly selfish, self-centered woman who destroys everything around her, and she's going to destroy you if you don't get away from her."

"You're describing me," he said grimly.

She shook her head. "No, you're not cruel. You don't mean to hurt people." She smiled at him as if he were a little boy. "You make me think of Dostoyevski's heroine, the one who cried her eyes out at the sad play she was seeing while her coachman froze to death outside."

He had to laugh. "Maybe I can get Connie to play Russian roulette with me."

"You're both doing that now," she said, and turned at the shrill laugh behind her.

"Well, isn't this quaint!" It was



Connie standing in the doorway, with the same dramatic entrance she had made in the play when he first saw her; the same mocking smile and the arrogant swagger as she came up to the bar. "The ex-wife, and the ex-writer!" Again the twisted grimace, the stagey, drunken laughter. "Why don't you take him back, Ruth? You can have him with my compliments!"

She stood between them in the awkward silence, swaying unsteadily, taking a sadistic delight in their embarrassment, then she waved gaily to the bartender. "Drinks for the eternal triangle, Joe."

"One side of it is leaving, Connie," Ruth said with a grim smile, "Thanks for the offer anyway."

Connie watched her exit with a triumphant sneer and with one of her mercurial changes bowed politely when she got up on the stool and he prevented her from falling off it. "The big love 'em and leave 'em boy!" She waved again to Joe, this time imperiously.

"Don't you think you've had enough," Barry said hopelessly.

Her laughter was shrill. "Yes, I've had enough, lover boy, but what am I going to do about it? If I had any money or could get a job I'd leave you like a shot, but I'm trapped. Trapped in a squalid hole in the wall with a writer who can't even write."

"You thought it was quaint when we were first married," he said with biting sarcasm.

She laughed mockingly. "Why don't you put that great talent for mystery stories to some practical use. Rob a bank and pay me off, and we'll *both* escape. All I need is enough money for new clothes and my fare to Hollywood—and a divorce."

"This is where I came in," he said wearily, and regretted it; they were already attracting attention, and Connie rose to it like a stage cue, swinging around on her stool with a deliberate display of legs, and surveying her audience with lofty disdain.

"The natives are revolting," she said in a loud voice and glared at the bartender. "What do you have to do to get a drink in this cheap ginmill, Joe?"

Joe shook his head. "No more, Connie."

"Why, you cheap—"

Barry took hold of her arm. "He's right. Come on, you can have one at home."

She swept his hand away and as she did she saw his half-emptied Old-Fashioned glass on the bar. Picking it up, she drained it in one gulp, and holding the heavy bottom in her palm she rammed the rim into his protesting mouth with a vicious jab.

"Why don't you kill her?" Bob Riva grinned. "You've done plenty of killing, in the war and in your lousy mystery stories."

"That was impersonal." The stitches that had been taken in Barry's lips made his smile even more twisted as he pointed to the abstract canvas on the wall. "Like that nightmare portrait of yours. My killing is abstract too."

Riva chuckled good-naturedly. He was a short dumpy man in a t-shirt and dungarees, and a mop of stiff black hair. "You call that portrait of Connie abstract?" He waved a hairy arm at the raw purple and green and yellow squares surrounding the cold blue squares. "That's your wife, pal, and you know it. That center ice cube is her heart, the same color cubes around it, her feelings. The raw colors come from the outside. That's the glamor she knew, just as cold, but colorful like a mirage." He took a sip of his drink. "What is the theatre but a mirage, and if your mind is a desert, the mirage becomes real and you crawl toward it panting thirstily for the purple applause and the gold that goes with it. Sure, it's abstract. What the hell is life? It's crawling toward something that isn't even there. Nothing but the colors—and they're unreal, just in your mind."

He got up, jerkily, running a thick hand through the brush of his hair, then waved it across the canvas. "Everything's in your mind, pal, no matter what you are or who you are, and it's the only thing that can possibly live after death." He grinned again. "And if you haven't

any mind, you're dead even while you're living! There's only one true color in life and that's darkness. In the daytime we kid ourselves; the sun is bright and the world's a rosy place, but you can't hold back the night." His stubby finger jabbed at the black squares. "That's death, pal. Death closing in."

Barry stared curiously at the checkered raw colors. "You see death for Connie there?"

Riva nodded. "I not only see death, but I see her pulling it over her like a mink coat—" His grin was suddenly sardonic. "Leaving one graceful leg exposed." He saw the torment in Barry's eyes. "Did you ever make a study of euthanasia?"

Barry was still staring at the canvas, and it had suddenly become alive like a Medusa head. "You're crazy," he said.

"Sure I'm crazy," Riva agreed, "And so were the Greeks. Euthanasia isn't just mercy for the old. It means an escape for the living dead, for the cretins. It's the only intelligent way to handle them."

"I'm a cretin," Barry said with a gesture of self-disgust.

"No, you're not. You're as sensitive as an exposed nerve, and that's just what's the matter with you." He jerked a pudgy hand toward the painting. "That and that bitch. You'd be doing both her and the state a favor if you killed her."

"And the state would do me a favor," Barry said dryly.

Riva didn't hear him; he was eyeing the portrait thoughtfully, developing the abstraction. "What's going to happen to her? Those black squares are the future closing in on her even before she dies. They represent a friendless old age, sickness, probably attempts at suicide—"

"She's already tried that," Barry grunted, "with an overdose of sleeping pills and histrionics."

"—and if she bungles death the way she does everything else," Riva went on, "she'll wind up in some sort of public institution with palsy and possible blindness, and nothing left but a scrapbook of notices she can't even read any more."

Barry's laugh was as tight as his mouth. "Where am I in that picture?"

Riva grinned and pointed. "You're that little black cube in the corner. The one that got away."

"I'll never get away," Barry said hopelessly. "That's also a portrait of me." There was a touch of hysteria in his laughter. "The portrait of Dorian Gray."

"It's you if you don't do something about it," Riva shrugged, then he motioned toward the bookcase with an enigmatic smile, "You've got the talent to get away."

Barry shook his head with a derisive snort, but as he mixed two more drinks the canvas seemed to draw his attention, and it was no longer a painting but an idea for a story. The center cube was the

protagonist, the colored squares around it the characters, moving slowly toward the core in the black shadows. He might get a modernistic mystery out of it.

He was looking at the little black square in the corner when he heard the cab stop in front of the building and the gay laughter. Looking out the widow he saw it was Connie and Sue Price, retired actress, and he could see both were drunk. "Here's your portrait in the flesh," he told Riva with a grim smile.

Riva gulped down his drink and got up hastily. "I'm getting out."

"Please don't," Barry begged, "If you're here it won't be so bad. She thinks you're quaint," he winked.

Riva sighed and they listened to the approaching gaiety and Connie's usual theatrical entrance. The front door was open and Connie came in proudly escorting the taxi driver, a skinny little man smiling uneasily, and followed by Sue Price, a mountainous blonde.

"Riva, darling!" Connie always called everyone by their last name. "I'm so glad you're here! I've just been telling Sue about you." She made a dramatic, sweeping gesture toward the abstract canvas, and would have lost her balance if the taxi driver hadn't held her up. "That's it, my dear! Isn't it priceless?"

Sue's befuddled "What is it?" was broken by a hiccup.

Connie giggled drunkenly. "It's me—a portrait of me!" Sue was

speechless and Connie rushed on. "Riva, this is Sue Price, my best friend—" A gay laugh. "—even if she lives in Mount Vernon. She's been with me in every show I've ever played, and she's a real trouper."

She smiled triumphantly at Barry who was reluctantly making more drinks, and introduced the taxi driver. "Middleton, I've brought you a brother writer! He's writing a book and he's got the most divine title. 'Taxi, Anyone?'" She patted him with a fond possessiveness. "His name's Gregory. Isn't that quaint?"

"Quaint as hell," Barry agreed.

Gregory grinned apologetically. "Your wife insisted I come up, mister Middleton. I wouldn't of, but—" His bright fox terrier eyes were full of admiration. "I've read all your books. I'm a great mystery fan. That last one of yours where the gal kills her husband and makes everyone think he committed suicide, sure had me fooled."

"Glad you liked it," Barry said, handing him a drink.

Connie let out a delighted gasp. "Why, Sue, that's just like that role I had in—what was the name of it?"

"'Lethal Lady,'" Sue lisped. "You were wonderful in it, doll." She was at the sentimental stage. "I'll never forget that last scene where you put the gun in your husband's hand after you shot him." She let out a sudden, hiccuppy

laugh. "You had on that sexy crepe de Chine nightgown, and when you bent over—"

She stopped, blushing like an overstuffed schoolgirl, and Barry smiled grimly, watching his wife drain her glass, the liquid dripping down over her pointed chin. "She's badly bent now," he said, and he knew it would start the fireworks, but he didn't give a damn; he was fed up. The last time she had brought up a couple of drunken bums she'd found on the street and insisted on giving them a good home-cooked dinner. He'd left then, and when he had returned she was in bed with one of the bums, the place a shambles.

He was drunk too, and suddenly all he could see were the raw colors of the abstract canvas, only now they were circling around like varilights in the sky, and his voice sounded as far away when he screamed, "Get out of here! All of you!"

He wasn't even conscious of Connie's snarling face, the glass striking his forehead, the brass paperweight crashing through the front window, Riva's ducking out, or Sue's protecting arm around Connie in motherly protection as she said, "Come on, dear, you can come home to Mount Vernon with me."

All he was dimly aware of was the taxi driver's scared face, his, "Listen, buddy—" and then the oblivion that he was trying so desper-

ately to reach. And even as he reached it, he knew that it was only temporary.

"Why don't you have her committed?"

Dick Manhoff watched Barry pace up and down his office with a compassionate understanding. He was a practising physician as well as a psychiatrist and he knew it was a hopeless case. "I'll be glad to sign the papers. You can't lick it, Barry," he said gently. "She doesn't want to be cured."

"That doesn't let me out," Barry said with a gesture of despair. "I brought this hell on myself, and I hate her guts, but I'm broke, and she's not going in any free clinic."

"She'd love it," Dick said dryly, "And that's where most actors and actresses end up. They've still got their public and they're happy, and they get even better treatment than in a private institution. In a private institution they're coddled and that just postpones the cure."

He sighed heavily, his glance going to the bottle of pink pills next to the portrait of his wife. "The world's full of neurotics, Barry, including myself. Self-made neurotics," he added, "Coddling themselves, and when they get to the edge, relying on coddled doctors who are just as neurotic as they are. We're all soft-hearted slobs, and sometimes I believe in Hitler's su-

per race. What good are the soft-hearted? They don't produce anything but more soft-hearted people, and in the end we have a nation of softies, sitting on soft cushions and pressing buttons that make them even softer."

Barry had to laugh. "You're a hell of a psychiatrist."

"It's the soft slobs and their neuroses that turned family physicians like me into psychiatrists," Dick said soberly, "They're too damn lazy and ignorant to treat their bodies decently, and we've capitalized on it just as your big business men have capitalized on human frailties." He grinned. "What you need is a good old-fashioned model that will take the hills with you."

"I had one," Barry said, "and turned it in for a hot-rod."

"Going downhill," Dick nodded, "And you're like a kid hanging on to a runaway car."

The nurse stuck her head in the door, and when Dick excused himself Barry lit a cigarette and exhaled the smoke with a despairing sigh. He had come up here with the faint hope of getting some medical advice, and all he'd gotten was what he already knew. He stood staring at the rosewood cabinet and without thinking opened the curtained glass door and looked at the array of bottles on the shelves. One was a large brown one, full of capsules and labeled, "Phenol-barbital." Without knowing why he was doing it he opened the bottle and

pouring out a fistful of the little pills, stuck them in his pocket. Maybe they would help him find oblivion without recourse to liquor, but he didn't want Dick to know.

When Dick returned he put his hand on Barry's shoulder and said sympathetically, "I don't mean to sound cold-blooded, Barry, but I knew Connie even before I knew you, and I've been treating her from time to time ever since then. She treats psychiatry the way she treated Alcoholics Anonymous, as if she were slumming. The only reason she comes up to see me now is to get more sleeping pills."

Barry could feel the capsules in his pocket and Dick took his unconsciously guilty look for fear. "Don't worry," he smiled, "Connie's not the suicidal type, and anyway I dole them out to her in very small quantities. As I told you, Connie doesn't want to be cured, and neither medicine nor psychoanalysis can help that kind of an illness. She already has two strikes against her—alcoholism and her age—the third is inevitable."

He kept his hand on Barry's shoulder as they moved to the door. "I think you should seriously consider putting her in an institution; it's her last chance."

Barry shook his head. "I can't do it, Dick. I was in Bellevue's free ward once after a bender, and I've never forgotten it. It was like a horrible nightmare; the strait-jackets, the screams of delirium, the stom-

ach pumps, the callousness of the nurses. It's bad enough for a man, but—"

"You forget Connie's callousness," Dick said grimly, "She's not only insensitive; she has a cruel streak, and liquor makes it worse."

"And I brought it on myself." Barry's wry smile was a grimace. "I'm stuck with it." He made a vague gesture. "Thanks—I guess I'll have to let nature take its course. Maybe she'll change."

He left hurriedly and walking over to Madison, stopped in to see his agent. Mike Ferris held up his hands when Barry entered his office. "I can't do it, Barry boy. I'm sorry as hell, but—"

"I don't blame you, Mike." Barry sat down wearily. "I don't expect you to advance me any more money. I was just going by and wondered if there had been any movie bites on the book."

"Not a nibble," Mike grunted. "Teevee's ruined the market. You can get two or three mysteries a day on the networks for free." He suddenly stared at Barry's mouth. "What happened to you?" He nodded with grim understanding as Barry shrugged. "She was up here this morning."

"Here?" Barry exclaimed angrily.

Mike waved it away as unimportant. "She's put the bite on me several times—said she needed it for you—but I finally got wise. This morning she claimed she was sick

and wanted to go out to some friend's house in Mount Vernon for a couple of days."

"Did you give her any money?"

"Ten bucks." He eyed Barry sympathetically. "I know you're going through hell, kid. The new book will be out next week, and if the reviews are any good maybe we can pry some more money out of Brown. Incidentally, he called me yesterday. They're releasing some publicity, and they want you to do a little autographing in the stores." He grinned at Barry's grimace of disgust. "Well, you would pick a Boston publisher. Anyway, you can get expenses out of it, and that'll help a little. They want you to start at Filene's." He stuck his hand in his pocket and offered the twenty with an apologetic gesture, and as Barry took it gratefully, he said, "Don't let her get you down. You're still one of the best in the business. Why don't you try a few short stories?" he added as Barry got up, "The man's magazines are looking for macabre humor."

Barry laughed harshly. "I married it."

When he got home he found a note from Connie on the desk, on top of a pile of unopened bills. "Am going out to Sue's for a day or two," it said.

There was a curious odor of gas in the apartment, and going into the narrow kitchen he found one of the burners turned on; the coffee pot had evidently boiled over, put-

ting out the flame. Turning the gas off, he opened the small window and with a wry grimace at the sink full of dirty dishes he went out and closed the door after him. It was then he remembered the pills he'd stolen, and he hid them in the pocket of his winter overcoat hanging in the hall closet.

Staring around the room he let out a deep sigh of relief in the peaceful silence; he'd have a chance to work for a couple of days, but he felt strangely restless. Lighting a cigarette, he went back to the desk and mechanically glanced through the bills. Most of them were second and third notices and he shook his head with a wry smile when he opened the one from the dentist. "Tooth extraction—\$25.00. Please!"

Connie still went to a Park Avenue dentist, and she had given a highly dramatic account of her taking gas for the extraction; it was the most divine feeling when you went under! The gas association reminded him of a short story idea he'd had in the back of his mind, and he remembered Mike's suggestion. It was grimly ironic, and he winced as he thought how close it came to his own life, but if that was what the magazines wanted, he might pick up some quick dough.

He found himself looking at the abstract portrait and unconsciously shivered; in the late afternoon light, the raw colors seemed to glow. Sitting down at the typewriter he eyed



the blank sheet of paper in it with a guilty sigh, then started jotting down a working synopsis. It was the sardonic story of a writer who had failed at everything and finally decided to commit suicide by taking gas. He had planned his death with painstaking care and was going to write down his impressions up to the last moment of consciousness, leaving behind him the only honest manuscript he'd ever produced. He figured it right down to the last detail, sealing every possible air outlet, then he sat down with a thick pad and pencil and turned on all four burners. He wrote steadily in the hissing silence, fighting the fumes until the very last, then, when he was about to lose the last flicker of consciousness, the gas company turned the meter off. When he tried to sell the story, the rejection slip said, "Lacks realism."

He jerked the sheet of paper out of the machine with a grunt of disgust; it was too contrived, too obvious an idea, and he'd never had any feeling for short stories anyway. What he needed to get him out of the hole he was in was something big; a dramatic shocker, a modern, psychological suspense mystery that might have play possibilities. He'd done it before and he could do it again if he could get away from the dipsomaniacal succubus he was tied to!

Mixing a highball he found himself staring at Riva's portrait; the raw colored cubes seemed to be

moving, and he turned away with a shudder, his mind a kaleidoscope of jagged fancies like the sharp splintered edges of the cracked hole still in the front window. They caught the red glow from the setting sun and turned the hole into a grinning gargoyle. It was laughing at him the way Connie did, with an animal snarl. The sun went down behind the building across the street and the head disappeared, and suddenly he could feel his heart pounding. He turned, his eyes drawn again to the portrait, and the colors exploded in his brain. He had his murder mystery! A murder mystery to end all murder mysteries—and his own hell! But instead of writing it, he would *live* it! Connie's portrait was a portrait of death, just as Riva had said, and all he had to do was fit the colored pieces together! He would plan it carefully, the way he plotted his novels, step by step, working it into a perfect pattern.

He remembered Riva's grinning and pointing to the little black square in the corner—the little black square that had gotten away—and the colors seemed to glow even brighter when he remembered Riva's saying, "You've got the talent to get away." Yes, he had the talent, but this time it wouldn't be in a book! This would be the mystery masterpiece of his life!

His feverish eyes swept the apartment, his mind already probing the possibilities; a faint smell of gas

still hung in the air, and as his glance stopped at the closed kitchen door, his heart stopped too for a split second, and suddenly he knew how he was going to do it. His hands were shaking as he lit another cigarette and the shiny keys on the typewriter seemed to be grinning at him, and his thoughts were clicking together almost audibly. The gas story—Connie's taking gas for the tooth extraction—the pattern was beginning to take form. He would pretend to be working on the story—ask her help in writing down the sensations she felt when the dentist gave her gas. She'd dramatized it with her usual exaggeration and if he could get her to word it right, it would be a suicide note in her own handwriting!

He turned slowly, his mind a radar groping for signs, and he drew in his breath with a sharp gasp as he remembered the sleeping pills in his overcoat pocket. It would be a simple matter to slip some in one of her drinks. She was an habitual user, so there would be no suspicion even if a post mortem showed an overdose. When she fell into a deep sleep all he had to do was carry her unconscious body into the kitchen, turn on the gas—place the suicide note beside her—and close the door. It would be almost as impersonal as his fictional killings, and as merciful. He wondered vaguely why he felt no sense of guilt; perhaps it was because fate

or some unseen power had arranged the details, and perhaps, as Riva said, it was a form of euthanasia.

Sitting down he took a fresh sheet of paper from the cardboard box, and slipping it in the typewriter, wrote rapidly, not even stopping to make corrections, and he was on the third page when he heard the click of her heels in the outside hall. He had gotten so he could tell by the sound what her condition would be; there was no unsteadiness in the heel taps now, no sharp, angry belligerence. They sounded almost gay, and when she came in she was smiling.

He could feel his heart beating faster and his voice didn't sound like his own when he said, "I thought you went to Mount Vernon?"

"Can't a lady change her mind?" She tossed her bedraggled mink stole on the bed and lit a cigarette, carelessly tossing the match through the jagged hole in the window. "I ran into Mark Preminger in Sardi's. He's going to do one of those anger plays, and he said there was a part in it just tailor-made for me. A prostitute," she added coyly.

His hands were trembling and he held them under the table, trying to keep his voice casual. The fates were again working for him; she was in one of her rare mellow moods, and he knew why; he could see her button-holing the producer,

and he knew that the promise of work was just in her alcoholic mind. "Fine," he said.

There was a purr in her laughter. "You mean I make a fine prostitute?" She made a mocking motion toward the typewriter. "Don't tell me you're working?"

The stitches in his lip tightened his smile. "I thought I'd try some short stories," he shrugged. "I stopped in to see Mike today, and he told me the market's opening up again." The smile was even more strained as he looked at her. "Say, you took gas when you had that tooth extracted, didn't you?"

"It was divine," she purred, "I had the most wonderful dreams."

"Maybe you could help me," he said, and told her the story. "I remember your describing it. If you could just jot down your sensations—"

She rose to it the way he thought she would, with an arrogant smile. "I'll bet I could write a better book than you."

"I don't doubt it," he agreed, with a jerky gesture toward the typewriter. "I can't seem to get the feeling of reality in the man's reaction to gas, but you've actually experienced it."

"It was divine," she repeated, "I had the most wonderful floating feel—" She was like a child describing a fairy tale.

"Swell," he said, "Write it down just the way you're telling it."

"Wait 'till I mix a drink."

He watched her tensely as she went to the small bar; her idea of mixing a drink was to pour out a half a glass of gin and add a little water. She sat down at the desk, brushing the bills to one side, and he could see she was going to make a big production of it when she picked up a large memorandum pad with a dramatic flourish.

"Just jot down your own impressions," he said, getting up, and he was still trembling despite his efforts to control his excitement.

She nodded impatiently and started writing in a careless scrawl, stopping to take a drink between sentences, and he came up behind her chair, unable to resist the desire to see what she was writing, and he jerked back when she snapped, "Stop peering over my shoulder!"

He tried to laugh but it came out a hoarse wheeze. "I'm sorry, take your time; I'll run down and get some cigarettes."

"And get another bottle of gin," she said, without looking up.

Going out, he had a curious feeling that he was in one of those nightmares where you're running desperately, but not moving, and unable to escape the terror pursuing you. Stopping in at Pete's he gulped down a drink, and after a couple more he could feel his courage returning. He kept his eyes on the old pendulum clock on the wall and it seemed to be saying, "Take—it—ea—sy." After a half hour he went back, stopping at the liquor

store for a bottle of gin, but when he opened the front door there wasn't a sound in the apartment, and he saw Connie stretched out on the bed, sound asleep.

There was a litter of scraps of paper on the floor around the desk and he could almost hear the thudding of his heart as he waited a moment, then tiptoed across the room. Gathering up the liquor-stained, ink-blotted pieces of paper, his eyes raced across each one, cursing mentally as he saw they were mostly childish observations. Letting them flutter to the floor again, he saw the memorandum pad on the desk, the top sheet covered with writing, and with a stifled gasp he picked it up and read it.

*"I have a wonderful drowsy feeling—a feeling of floating on a lovely white cloud toward peace and forgetfulness—what a divine way to die! It's as simple as going to sleep."*

There was a faint ripping sound as he tore the sheet from the pad and put it in his pocket.

Connie was still sleeping soundly so he opened the door and went out again and walked around to the Chinese restaurant, and while he was waiting for his order, he took the note out and studied it. It was almost too perfect, he thought, and yet it was just the sort of farewell a drink-crazed, dramatic actress

might leave. He smiled to himself grimly; she should have ended it, "Good night, sweet prince!"

Now he had to plan a perfect alibi, a foolproof alibi; everybody in the neighborhood knew of their temperamental discord, their brawls and fights. He would be suspect immediately. But the suicide note reassured him; no one could mistake her writing. He didn't know how he was going to do it, but he would have to be far away, have witnesses that he was far away when it happened.

Feeling a pang of hypocrisy he ordered an extra container of chop-suey and took it home, but Connie was still asleep and he put it on the stove and crawled into bed beside her. He lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, unable to sleep. His mind was whirling with ideas, but, ironically, he was too conscious of her nearness and he could feel his body breaking into a panicky sweat. She was mumbling in her sleep, and when she turned, throwing one arm across him, he cringed in sheer horror, but afraid to move. The warmth of her body, pressing against his was like an oven, her knee across his legs holding him prisoner, and he had a wild desire to scream aloud and choke the evil-smelling breath out of her as she murmured incoherently. Even in her semi-consciousness there was something cruel in her ardor; she was like an animal, clawing at his arm and dragging him on top of

her. It was as if the viciousness of it had suffused both of them and, curiously enough, even as he made love to her he felt his determination strengthening.

He watched with a shudder as she got up and drank from the bottle of gin he had brought home, and when he told her about the chop suey she got it from the kitchen and sat on the edge of the bed eating it from the container and spilling it on her naked breasts. Tossing the empty box on the floor, she lay back in bed and went to sleep again like a baby.

On the strength of her hallucination about getting a job, she had made a date with the hairdresser's, and when she left in the morning he could feel the excitement mounting within him. She had forgotten all about her literary efforts, and he picked up the scraps of paper and flushed them down the toilet, then he sat down at his typewriter and stuck a sheet of paper in it just as if he were going to start a story, only this one wasn't ever going to be written. This would have to be the perfect crime, even if he, like the police, knew there was no such thing. He didn't touch the keys; he lit a cigarette and sat staring at the blank sheet of paper, but his mind wasn't blank like it had been before. It was desperately alert, groping for a solution that would never be written except in his mind. It was there someplace, like the water mark on the paper; all he had to

do was hold it up to the light.

When the phone rang he answered it mechanically, still staring at the sheet of paper. It was Mike Ferris and when Mike reminded him of his autograph job in Boston, he knew he had the solution, and again he had the feeling that some unseen power was working.

"You can live it up at the Hilton for a couple of days," Mike told him with a chuckle, "And give the Back Bayers a thrill. They go for murder mysteries like baked beans, and you can pad enough on the expense account to keep yourself going for a couple of weeks. Maybe by that time—anyway, come on up to the office and I'll give you some dough. They want you up there the day the book comes out. That's next Monday."

He hung up and he could see the word "Boston" on the sheet of paper, and now it was like a mental road map with lines radiating from it. New York was only an hour from Boston by plane; he could sneak back to the apartment and return to Boston in less than three hours. His eyes were drawn to the portrait, and now he was sure the colored squares were moving, moving toward that cold blue cube in the center. Then the cold blue was his own heart; plane passengers were listed; the dumbest detective, suspecting homicide, would check that alibi. Despite his thwarted feelings he had a sudden feeling of exhilaration; Connie wasn't the

warm body he'd slept with; she had become as impersonal as one of his fictional victims, as impersonal as those shadowy silhouettes he'd shot at overseas and in his stories, an evil character that had to be wiped out in the last chapter to show that the wages of sin are death!

When he left the house, Muller, the janitor was sweeping the front sidewalk and his thin, weather-beaten face twisted into a sly smile as he motioned toward the broken window above them. "Looks like you were doin' a little celebratin', Mister Middleton."

He was a human scarecrow, with a cadaverous body and the pale, watery eyes of the heavy drinker, and there was a sympathetic gleam in them when Barry shook his head wryly. "I'll put in a new pane for you and tell the landlord some of them juve'nile dee-linquents did it."

"Thanks Muller," Barry grinned. Fishing in his pocket he gave the old man a dollar and nodded grimly. "A juvenile delinquent did do it."

Muller chuckled in appreciation of the joke and looked up at the window again when Barry left, licking his lips expectantly, remembering the time he'd fixed the kitchen sink. Mrs. Middleton hadn't paid any attention to him at all, walking around half naked, and when she'd gone into the bathroom and left the door open and he heard the shower running, he'd peeked around the corner and got the pant-

ing surprise of his life. She had an old woman's face but the body of a young girl. No wonder Middleton stood for her drinkin' and carryin' on!

Barry decided to walk up to Mike's; he could always think better when he was walking. Some way, somehow, he would have to work out an alibi to show that he was in Boston at the time of the crime. His mind had already rejected the word murder; it was an escape, an escape for both of them. For Connie, an escape from an alcoholic old age that held nothing but mental and physical disintegration. For him? His future lay in his own hands and his own talent, but no matter what it held it would be better than his present nightmare.

As he walked up Fourth Avenue the Grand Central Station loomed up ahead of him, and its illuminated clock seemed to be a beckoning eye. The Boston train would be safer he could travel incognito and pass unnoticed, but the longer time element made it impractical. It would take six or seven hours to make the round trip, and his absence from Boston for that length of time would be sure to be discovered.

Threading his way through the milling noontime crowds in the terminal, he bumped into a woman and apologized absently, then stared after her in shocked surprise when he saw it was Connie. There

was something utterly fantastic, almost fatalistic about it, he thought with an uneasy shudder. Bumping into his own wife, a woman he was going to murder, in a city of eight million people!

Connie hadn't even noticed him in her hurry, and he was wondering what she was doing in that part of town when he remembered her phoning Sue Price before she left the house and telling her of her good news. She must drop everything and dash into town; there might be a part for her too. Connie had a new hairdo and there was a childishly happy look on her face but he could tell from her swaggering stride that she was already charged up with alcohol.

He watched her hurry toward one of the gates to meet Sue's train, and was about to turn away when he noticed the stream of passengers coming out of another gate farther along the line. The sign above the lighted exit said, "Boston Express," and his heart began beating rapidly; if he could come out of that gate, and there was someone there to meet him, he'd have a perfect alibi! His glance swept the long line of gates, and he noticed that some were dark and open, and through them he could see the inside promenade where the railroad tracks came to an end, and now his heart was pounding with excitement. Going to the Information Booth he got a timetable, and sitting down in the waiting room

read it with trembling hands.

There was a train from Boston that got in at twelve o'clock at night. On the last day of his autograph stint he could fly back early in the evening under an assumed name, but before leaving, phone Mike to meet the late train, then after he had returned to the apartment and completed his mission, all he had to do was go up to Grand Central, sneak in one of the open gates, walk along the inside abutment and come out the Boston exit with the other passengers where Mike would be waiting for him! There was only one chance of exposure; if it was discovered later what time he left Boston, but he could even cover that up by leaving without paying his bill, phoning the hotel from the airport when he got back to New York, and apologize; say that, in his haste to catch the train he had forgotten to pay it.

There remained only one weak link in his chain and that was to make sure that Mike would meet the train, and by the time he got to his office he had figured it out. When he phoned Mike from Boston before he took the plane, he would tell him that he had had a slight heart attack and to be sure and meet him at the midnight train.

Mike shook his head when he told him that Connie had been threatening suicide, and he feared leaving her alone, and curiously

enough Mike echoed Dick Manhoff's words. "I don't mean to be cold-blooded, Barry, but that dame has been committing suicide for years, and it couldn't happen to a nicer guy." He grinned. "I mean, you. Stop feeling sorry for her. Get out before you have to be carried out."

It was ironic, he thought, as he left Mike's office; he couldn't help feeling sorry for her. He could visualize her swaggering into Mark Preminger's office, buoyed up by liquor and hope, a fallen star that didn't know she had fallen. He was no different; he hadn't even been a star, just a writer with a fairly creative imagination, yet unable to recognize his own wrongdoing, and here he was planning the greatest wrong man could do, and encouraged in it by intellectual minds. There was no love or pity in intellect; it was simply ruled out. But maybe the intellectuals were wrong; perhaps the flesh was stronger than the mind, ruled it instead of the other way around. Nature had no mind but it flourished long after human intelligence. You couldn't see the mind but you could see nature everywhere. Connie was nature, and just as wild, the head withered by self-indulgence, but the stem still pliant and fruitful.

"Man kills the thing he loves," he quoted grimly, and wondered if he would have the final courage to go through with his perfect

crime, then he realized with a shock that it was just the flesh that held him and ruled his mind. It was a malignant growth that had to be removed, and he would have to be the surgeon.

They had been sitting in Mark Preminger's office for nearly an hour, and Sue eyed Connie uneasily. "You'll never get the job, dearie, if he smells your breath. You're higher than a kite."

"I'm just excited," Connie said, taking a box of Clorets from her bag and swallowing a few.

"You're drunk," Sue said bluntly, then softened. "Look, I had to put mama in the hospital and she'll be there for at least a month. Whether you get this part or not, why don't you come out and stay with me for a while. You can be all by yourself in the spare room and get a good rest. The show probably won't go into rehearsal until fall and it will give you a chance to get back on your feet."

"I'm all right," Connie snapped, and jumped up with a gay smile when Preminger's secretary came out of the inner office, addressing the waiting group in general. "No more casting for 'The Angry Heart,'" she announced in a bored tone that turned into an indignant croak as Connie moved toward the private door. "You can't go in there. Mr. Preminger's very busy."



Connie shook her restraining hand off and jerked the door open, nearly losing her balance, and when Mark looked up from his desk her voice was shrill. "Mark, you promised me that part!"

He shook his head wearily, anger rising when he saw her condition. "I didn't promise you anything, Connie, and you know it. Now get out of here, before I report you to Equity. You're a disgrace to the profession."

Connie's face was a twisted, venomous mask. "You dirty fagot!" she screamed. Picking up the water carafe on his desk, she hurled it in his face as he jumped up. It missed him and crashed through the window facing Shubert Alley.

When she flounced out the waiting room was empty, and she didn't even hear the glass smash as she slammed the outer door after her. Staggering down the stairs, she started to cross the street to Sardi's, then turned and went to a dingy saloon on Forty-Fifth street. Even in her cups, she knew she was finished, and she gulped down one straight shot after another until the bartender refused to serve her any more.

The reaction had set in by the time she got home; there were no tears, just a blind, consuming rage. She stood, swaying unsteadily, glaring around the apartment, and as her inflamed eyes stopped at the typewriter, her rage turned on Barry. He was the cause of this hell

she was in! With a wild sweep she knocked the typewriter off the table, then staggering to the desk, jerked the drawer open to get at his manuscripts. Picking up an armful she went out the front door and shoved them down the incinerator in the hall, then came back for more, and as she clawed at them she saw the thick narrow envelope with the name of an insurance company on it, and the words, "Life Insurance."

Taking the policy out of the envelope she stared at it in a befuddled daze; it was for twenty thousand dollars, and the name, "Mrs. Barry Middleton, wife," was written after "Beneficiary." Her laugh was a snarl. He'd never mentioned it, kept it hidden, and her bitterness rose like the liquor fumes in her head, then died as she realized what it meant. Twenty thousand dollars would mean a new life for her, a new start, new clothes—Hollywood! She could even stop in Phoenix at Elizabeth Arden's on the way out and get her health and beauty back.

But he wouldn't die! No such luck! The policy in her hand was like a mocking flag and with a curse she threw it on the floor, and when she snatched up another pile of scripts she saw the revolver lying in the back corner of the drawer. Picking it up gingerly, she stared at it, fascinated, and as her hand closed around the butt the feel of it took her back to the play

she was in. "Lethal Lady," that was the name of it.

There was a dreamy smile on her face and she got up unsteadily, the scene where she had killed her husband coming to life in her fevered mind. She could see him facing her, the sneering smile on his cruel face, and she could even remember her lines:

*"So you thought you could destroy me the way you've destroyed everybody that got in your way! You're not a man, you're an animal, a vicious animal in a concrete jungle, tearing the little animals to pieces with your bare teeth—" A shrill laugh. "Those lovely white teeth that give you such a winning smile, those mealy lips that kiss little babies and pat them on the head while you're ruining their fathers!*

*"Well, you're going to lose this election because I've got a vote that can stop you, a vote that you can't buy!" The revolver came out from behind her dress, and pointing it at the apparition before her, she pulled the trigger, and she was so carried away by her fantasy she was hardly conscious of the deafening blast and the smoking hole in the red cover of one of the manuscripts. Her voice was a triumphant snarl as she leaned over her victim. "You've made your last political speech, Julius Caesar, and when your constituents find your lily-white hand gripping this gun butt, they'll say, 'Suicide was too good for him!'"*

She straightened up, slowly coming out of it, and when she saw the tiny wisp of smoke issuing from the gun barrel, it made her think of a smiling genie and she found herself suddenly staring at the insurance policy on the floor. It was like a silent cue, and her eyes glittered with excitement; it would be so easy! She could see Barry's cynical, condescending expression twisting into craven supplication when she let him have it. Her mouth was twisted too as she pictured herself in the dramatic role, a woman of righteous vengeance. He was no different than the despicable character in the play, a domineering egomaniac destroying others because of his own failure as a man.

Even as she stooped over and picked up the policy and put it back in the drawer, followed by the scattered scripts, she was reliving the next scene in the play where she fled to her lover's house and established her alibi. That had been the sardonic high point in the drama when she had convinced him that her husband had committed suicide, but that she would be blamed, and she could remember the wonderful curtain where he faced the authorities and told them she had spent the night with him!

She had had no lovers since her marriage to Barry, except for occasional alcoholic lapses which she couldn't even remember, but she would find one! She knew her

own physical lure; she had drawn men on deliberately, and then repulsed them with sadistic delight. Sex, to her, meant nothing but a feeling of power over men; Barry had been the only one who had given her any sexual satisfaction, and in her twisted mind she blamed him not only for the loss of her career, but for the wrinkles in her face and her ill health. He was an oversexed psychopath who deserved to be shot like a mad dog, and then she would be able to start a new life. She was only thirty-six; she still had a lovely figure, and a series of beauty treatments would quickly restore the youth in her face. She was pretty sure Hollywood knew nothing of her reputation for drinking, but they knew of her stage successes; in fact, she had had offers during the run of "Lethal Lady," but she had spurned them. She was a legitimate actress!

Her mind went back to the play, and how she had lured her victim close enough so that there would be powder burns on his clothes and would show that the bullet wound had been self-inflicted. She remembered how she had sat in bed waiting for him, wearing that sexy crepe de Chine nightgown that Sue had spoken about; she'd worn nothing beneath it, and when she got out of bed after shooting him, she could still hear the gasp that had gone through the audience.

That was the way she would be

waiting for Barry, but she wouldn't be wearing anything; he couldn't resist her when he saw her naked, and when he leaned over to take her in his arms—

She looked at the gun in her hand and saw there were still five shells in the chamber, and she put it back in the desk drawer under the pile of manuscripts, along with the one with the hole in it. Picking up the typewriter she placed it back on the table, and suddenly remembered the scripts she had thrown down the incinerator. Well, he wouldn't miss them; they were old, rejected stories, and he seldom opened that drawer.

She was comparatively sober now, and going out to the kitchen she poured out a glassful of gin, not even bothering to add water. As she sipped it she smiled maliciously, remembering the scene in Mark Preminger's office. Well, he was a fagot and everybody knew it; she no longer cared now; soon she would be in Hollywood and Broadway would be just an unpleasant memory. Poor Sue! Even she had ducked out. Carrying her drink into the living room, she dialed Sue's number, and when it didn't answer, she sat staring at the desk, thinking about "Lethal Lady." She laughed shrilly; this would be a real revival, and she would again be the star! All she needed was a different kind of alibi. She found herself staring at the phone, whispering, "Sue!" Sue

would be her alibi; she would accept her invitation for a visit. Mount Vernon was only a half an hour away, and when the time was right, she could sneak back to town just long enough for the assignation, and then return to Mount Vernon where Sue would find her in the morning still asleep in the spare room!

In the meantime she must treat Barry with loving kindness so that he would suspect nothing; she vaguely remembered his saying something about having to go to Boston to autograph his new book. That was when she would do it, on his return when he would be hungry for her body. Her eyes dilated with excitement as they rested on the hi-fi in the corner; the sound from it would cover up the shot, just as it had in the play!

Getting up, she went in the bathroom and turned on the shower, and as she undressed she admired the smooth lines of her figure in the bathroom door mirror, and she could picture herself in Hollywood playing some exotic role. The cold water, after the warm, gave her an exhilaration she'd never known and she was starting to dry herself when she heard Barry's step in the hall. Running to the bed she threw back the covers and lay down, her heart fluttering expectantly, then she draped them across her body so that one slender leg dangled carelessly over the side. As she heard the key turn in the lock she

felt like a young bride once again.

Barry's hand trembled as he unlocked the door, and he waited a moment to steady his nerves; his role must be that of kindness and sympathy, but he mustn't overdo it, or he would arouse Connie's suspicions. She was already a wounded animal and would react savagely to any phoney tenderness. She was a feline in her instincts as in her body; he would have to gain her confidence gradually like one does with a child, but he had only three days in which to do it!

He smiled grimly when he opened the door and saw her lying on the bed in a posed nakedness that was almost a caricature; there was something terribly ironic in the situation. He was going to have to make love to a woman he was going to murder, a woman who was deliberately exposing herself to it! Closing the door quietly, he went directly to the kitchen which was to be her tomb, and mixed himself a drink. As he sipped it, his mind was that of the calculating criminal; the narrow confines, the tiny window, made it a perfect gas chamber; even the door fitted tightly.

As if he were already sealing the crime, he closed the door after him and stood beside the bed looking down at her. Her breasts were rising and falling with rhythmic regularity, her eyes closed in peaceful slumber, one slender leg dangling

over the side in mute invitation. Lifting it to one side, he sat down and then her eyes fluttered open and with a warm, sleepy yawn she opened her arms.

It was like their first affair, he thought poignantly, and probably their last! He couldn't understand her sweet ardor, and as he mixed a drink for her and brought it back to the bed he wondered if she had finally gotten a job, and he felt a sense of intense relief; perhaps this would solve their whole problem, but when he heard the purring satisfaction in her voice, he knew her loving welcome was just an act.

He found himself acting too as he lit their cigarettes and said, "How did it go uptown?"

She shrugged with just the right rhythmic movement of her shoulders and carelessly wiped the spilled liquor from her breasts. "Oh, all right," she murmured, and remembered what Sue had said. "But the play won't go into rehearsal until fall." She smiled wanly. "Maybe, in the meantime, I can sort of pull myself together."

"Sure you can," he nodded, and his smile was as drawn as his stitched lips. "We'll go on the wagon together."

She drew the covers over her in sudden maidenly modesty. "But you're going away."

His heart started pounding as he caught the feline gleam in her eyes, and then he remembered that he'd told her. "Only for a few

days," he said, and his shrug was a guilty shudder. "I've got to go to Boston—one of those damn autograph publicity stunts, but it will help sell the book."

"When will you be back?" she asked coyly.

"Wednesday night." He patted her leg affectionately and he wondered why it felt cold. "When I get back we'll start a new life."

She lifted his hand and held it. "We can do it, Middleton, and I'll be waiting for you." She squeezed his hand. "I can't do it without you."

The weekend was almost idyllic, and the sardonic thought occurred to him that they were like wartime lovers who knew that they might never see each other again, but as her insatiability waned, she forgot her angel of mercy role, and the tide of liquor overflowed and swept over him in a sadistic flood of invective. "Why don't you kill yourself and get it over with," she taunted him, and caught herself just in time when she started to make a sweeping motion toward the desk drawer. "I'll kill you with love, Middleton," she giggled drunkenly.

The doorbell rang as she went to the kitchen for another drink, and she greeted Bob Riva with the same taunting smile. "Ah! The great impressionist!" She laughed shrilly and covered her nakedness in a mocking September Morn pose. "You're used to nudes, Riva,

so I'm sure you won't mind me." He started to back out hastily, but she gripped his arm with a challenging smirk. "Don't tell me the impressionist has lost all his impressions?" She turned slowly in a burlesque imitation of a fashion model, and smiled with feline satisfaction as she saw his surprised eyes taking in the youthfulness of her body. Facing him deliberately with a mocking grimace, she said, "Oh, don't run away, Rival!"

She could see him wetting his thick lips, then he winked at Barry and looked at her again. "Maybe some time when the author's not at home," he grinned, and closed the door on her hysterical laughter.

The next morning Connie was still asleep when Barry quietly packed a small bag, and before going out he left a note on the desk. "Will be back Wednesday night around eleven," he wrote, and smiled grimly when he added, "Take care of yourself."

He was standing at the corner trying to attract a taxi when he saw Ruth coming along the street with a man, and he shuddered inwardly, wondering if she would be able to read the guilt in his mind. She waved as they approached and he was sure his nervousness was apparent, but she didn't seem to notice it. The man with her was tall and almost gaunt, with prematurely gray hair, and Barry suddenly found his heart skipping a beat when he remembered having

seen him occasionally at Pete's. He was a police detective.

"Well, where are you off to?" Ruth motioned toward the bag he was carrying and gave him a friendly smile, but there was a strange embarrassment behind it that he couldn't understand.

"Boston," he told her, his voice tight. "Going down to see my publisher."

"Oh, does that mean the new book's coming out?" Barry nodded and she touched the detective's arm. "Barry, this is Jim Regan. He's a detective," she added, "And he's a fan of yours."

Barry managed an awkward grin as he shook Regan's hand, and he had a feeling it was gripping his heart. "Coming from a professional, that's quite a compliment."

Regan chuckled good-naturedly. "Oh, you slip up once in a while. That story of yours where the gal killed her husband and made the police think it was suicide, wouldn't fool a rookie."

"No?" Barry said politely.

"It's impossible for a man to shoot himself directly in the stomach," Regan grinned. "He couldn't hold the gun at that angle, and the post-mortem would show it." He chuckled again. "But don't mind my post-mortems."

Barry was relieved to see a cab pulling up at the curb. "I'll remember that," he said, and looked at Ruth. "Wish me luck."

Ruth had a flushed smile on her face as he opened the door of the cab. "Better wish me luck too. Jim and I are going to be married."

"Well, congratulations!" Barry felt a sudden wave of intense relief when he got in the cab, but the uneasiness was still there. If he didn't cover up better than he just had, he'd give himself away sooner or later. His hands were trembling as he lit a cigarette and remembered Regan's rather condescending criticism; there must be no slip-up this time! And he hoped there would be no slip-up with Ruth; she deserved a happy marriage.

All the way to the airport and on the flight to Boston he went over the details in his mind, getting a curiously detached pleasure in the process. He was going through the same throes of creation as he did with every new mystery he wrote, working the plot backwards from the denouement to the inception of the crime. Looking down at the brown and green-squared terrain it made him think of a checkerboard; that's what his plot would be, a chess game in reverse, with Connie as the pawn.

He knew that the most dangerous part of his perfect crime would be his return to the apartment and when he left it; if he was seen by any of the neighbors or the janitor, it might come out later and his alibi would be ruined. However, it

would be after dark and he could go in the cellar entrance and take the self-operating elevator from the basement. He would have to chance the risk of running into the tenants on his floor when stepping out of the elevator, but there were only four apartments, and at that time of night they would probably be getting ready to retire.

He would have to face the same danger of running into someone he knew when he went up to Grand Central, and it was then that the idea of a disguise occurred to him, and he gave a nervous chuckle; this was turning into an old time melodrama with the dastardly villain twirling his mustachios, and yet it was the only way he could make sure of escaping unnoticed. That was another weak point in his plot, but if he picked up a false mustache, even a beard, and a hat—he never wore one—while he was in Boston, he could walk right in the front door of his building, hide his disguise behind the radiator in the hall outside his apartment, and pick it up again when he left. Even if, by some unlucky break, he was recognized, he could pass it off as a joke.

His heart began beating faster as he pictured himself opening the front door, finding Connie in bed. If she was drunk, so much the better; he would get her another drink and slip the extra sleeping tablets in it. If she was sober, there would be the usual conversation

about his trip, and what she had been doing, a suggested drink or a glass of milk, and then the tense waiting until she passed out. His hand shook as he felt his breast pocket to make sure the suicide note was safe. The sleeping pills he could get out of his overcoat pocket when he put his bag in the hall closet on his return.

Afterward, he would have plenty of time to walk up to Grand Central and he could drop his disguise in a trash can just before meeting Mike. He went over it again and again looking for weak spots, and as the plane came into the Boston airport he murmured to himself, "Happy landing!"

Checking in at the hotel, he bought the morning papers and took them up to his room and skimmed through them until he found the advertisement of his new book, and the announcement that "Mr. Barry Middleton, famous mystery writer would be autographing copies at Filene's from two to four, Monday through Wednesday. He smiled sardonically as he tossed the papers in the waste basket; he'd be autographing his own alibi!

On a sudden impulse he phoned Connie and when he heard her husky, childish voice he felt guilty as hell; it had a curious babyish quality, and when she was sober she stuttered, but there was no stutter now, just a sleepy, sexy languor. She missed him, and he could see

her sitting on the edge of the bed, as naked as her soul, with her breakfast on the bedside table. For a while it had been black coffee, but she no longer bothered with a percolator; gin percolated quicker.

"I'm going out to Sue's for a couple of days," she told him, "But I'll come back Wednesday." Her voice was a feline purr, and he no longer felt guilty. "I've got your sweet note right here beside me—and I'll be waiting for you." He could hear a low giggle and knew she was sipping her second cup of coffee. "Take care of yourself," she said, echoing his own words.

Connie was still giggling when she hung up; her new life was beginning! Finishing her breakfast drink, she rubbed her breasts with a sudden exhilaration and walking into the bathroom, posed in front of the bathroom door mirror with a sultry smile that she knew would put Hollywood in a dither. All the middle-aged sirens were doing the same thing; sex was still sex, and with the right lighting effects, she could make Ginger Rogers and Yvonne de Carlo look like mummies. And not only that, she was an actress! A *legitimate* actress! With a legitimate body! She didn't need any falsies. Sticking out her breasts, she admired their pink uprightness.

The morning and the future



were like that she thought exultantly as she fixed another drink, and she began humming "California, Here I Come" off-key. Dialing Sue's number, she said, "Darling, what happened to you!"

Sue laughed. "Where are you—in jail? I got out, dearie. I've been one of your innocent bystanders before." Her motherly voice softened. "I know what a disappointment it must have been, but honestly, Connie, you were a mess. How do you feel?"

"Just wonderful, Sue, and you won't believe it, but I'm going to be a new woman." There was a gurgling pause as she took a sip of her drink and lit a cigarette. "Do you still want me to come out? The author's gone to Boston and I'm desolate."

"You don't sound it," Sue said suspiciously, "But I'd love to have you and you know it. There's a train at one o'clock and I'll meet you."

"Wonderful," Connie repeated, and hanging up she gazed around the room with a dreamy smile as if it were a stage set. She was a star again, and there wouldn't be any temperamental director tearing his hair and telling her what to do this time! She remembered the out-of-town tryout of "Lethal Lady," and how he had tried to hold her down in the part and accused her of chewing up the scenery, but he had admitted after the play opened that she was right; she had turned

a mediocre drama into a hit, and even the critics had said it was perfect type casting!

Going to the desk she opened the drawer and took out the revolver; this would be a dress rehearsal! There was a childlike expectancy in her smile as she moved toward the bed, carrying the gun in one hand and the drink in the other. Turning on the hi-fi she laughed drunkenly; it was "Scheherazade," and so appropriate! Arranging the pillows behind her, she sat stiffly upright, one hand holding the gun at her side underneath the covers, the other caressing her breasts. The sun shining in the front windows turned them into giant footlights, and as the music rose in volume her heart rose with it. Her excited gaze went to the front door and she could see Barry coming in, pausing at the top of the low steps, then approaching the bed when she greeted him with a loving smile. When he leaned over to kiss her Lethal Lady would play a return engagement!

She could see him falling with the same shocked expression on his face as the actor who had played her husband, and without realizing she was doing it she slid out of bed, and after an eye-filling pause for her unseen audience, went through the motions of placing his limp hand around the butt of the revolver. She could feel her whole body perspiring from the

realness of the scene, and she could almost see him lying there as if he'd fallen off the edge of the bed after shooting himself. Her eyes began to glitter with animal cunning when they came to rest on the typewriter, and a low laugh rose out of her wrinkled throat. She would type a suicide note! He was a failure and sick of life—and he hoped she would be happy! She would leave it in the machine and if her typing was unprofessional it would be attributed to the mental torment of the writer.

The music swelled again and she was so engrossed in her play-acting she didn't hear the knock on the front door or the key turning in the lock, and she turned with a startled gasp to see Muller, the janitor coming in. He stopped, his pale eyes bulging with astonishment that swiftly changed to a mouth-watering lustful leer. "Scuse me, Missus Middleton!" he croaked huskily, but his hot gaze was glued on her nakedness. "I thought you'd gone out and forgot to turn off the phonograph."

He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and made a vague gesture. "I thought I'd come up and fix the window."

"I'm going out in a little while," Connie said calmly, "And you can do it then." She could feel his eyes following her as she turned off the hi-fi and picked up the bathrobe lying on the bed and there was a feline satisfaction in her deliberate-

ness. She remembered the time he had come up to fix the sink and had peeked at her taking a shower; she knew he was there and had taken a perverse delight in pretending ignorance.

Putting on the bathrobe she made no attempt to tie the belt, and his voice was a hollow wheeze when he motioned with the yardstick he carried and said, "Mind if I measure the window now so I can cut the glass?"

Connie shrugged, letting the robe flap open and carelessly lit a cigarette. "All right, but hurry up." She watched him with a catlike smile as he went to the window, and she could see his open-mouthed reflection in the glass staring at her while he shakily measured it. She let out a low purring laugh and when he turned there was saliva on his thin lips and his burning eyes were on the opening in her robe, then his mouth twisted into a salacious smirk.

"You look like one of them strip tease women, Mrs. Middleton, only you got a prettier shape." He jerked a pint bottle out of his hip pocket. "What do you say we have a little nip?"

With a mocking laugh Connie took the bottle and tipping her head back she took a long swallow, knowing that her robe no longer covered her body, then she felt his coarse hands grabbing at her and she let out a contemptuous snarl. "Why you filthy, senile old man!"

She tried to hit him with the bottle but he was holding her too tight and it fell to the floor. Her derision had now turned to vitriolic rage and she brought her knee up in a vicious kick and clawed at his face, and when he let out a groan of pain she pointed to the door and screamed, "Get out of here before I call the police!"

He straightened up, panting heavily but still staring at her body, then, as if suddenly realizing what he'd done, he stumbled out of the apartment. Connie watched him, her blazing anger turning back to derision, and she burst into hysterical laughter.

She felt as if she was getting ready for a party when she got dressed, taking special care with her makeup, and as she surveyed herself in the closet door mirror she started laughing again. She was a strip tease artist all right, and she had the figure to go with it! She wouldn't look a day over twenty-seven or eight if she could get rid of the lines in her face.

Gulping down a quick drink she went to the front door and waved gaily over her shoulder to the imaginary corpse by the side of the bed. When she reached Grand Central she found she still had half an hour to wait for the one o'clock train, so she got a Mount Vernon time-table, and sat in the waiting room trying to figure it out. She could ask Sue what time the trains left Mount Vernon for

New York in the early evening, but it might arouse her suspicions. The print in the time-table was like the small type in her contracts, she thought with a nervous giggle, and then the type rose up like top billing. There was a train that left for New York every night at 8.10, and one that left Grand Central for Mount Vernon at 11.45. That would give her over two hours, and she could feel her heart beating happily as she realized the late one was the after-theatre train! It was just too perfect!

Going out on the train she gazed out the window at Harlem's drab tenements and a delicious shiver went through her body; it wouldn't be long before she would be taking the same trip on the Twentieth Century and The Chief! Sue was waiting for her at the station and escorted her to a beat-up Ford in the grand manner. Her house was only two blocks from the station but her arches were killing her, and besides she had to go to the supermarket—and the liquor store, she added, with a smile.

Connie took advantage of the opportunity as Sue backed the car around, and said, "I've a splitting headache, darling. Do you mind if I don't go with you? If I could just lie down for a few minutes—"

"Of course," Sue said sympathetically, "I'll drop you off at the house, and you just make yourself right at home. You know where your room is."

Yes, Connie knew where it was; she'd spent some horrible nights in it, staring out the back window at the rear of a saloon on the next street, and one night she had sneaked out without Sue's knowing it, and had a few shots to settle her nerves. That's what she would be doing Wednesday night, and she could hardly wait until Sue waved goodbye and disappeared around the corner. Lighting a cigarette, she still had the feeling that she was playing her part in Lethal Lady, even if Sue's modest little home wasn't anything like the luxurious stage set where she had visited her lover.

Unconsciously tiptoeing, she went upstairs and after pecking in Sue's front room, hurried along the hall to the spare room and smiled with satisfaction when she saw the back stairway that led down to the kitchen and the back door. She hadn't been sure if she had remembered it correctly, and she gave a little gasp of pleasure as she went down to the kitchen and unlocked the back door. It looked out on a neat back yard, and there was a side walk that went around to the front of the house. It would be easy to complain of another headache and go to her room, then slip out and catch the eight-o'clock train, and come back on the later one without Sue's even knowing she had left. And in the morning Sue would find her in bed asleep.

Going back upstairs she lay down but she was too excited to sleep, and when she heard Sue coming in she went down and joined her. They sat in the kitchen and had their cocktails while Sue put the frozen supermarket dinners in the oven. It was like old times, and they talked old times, and as the drinks percolated, Connie's inner excitement turned into bitter self-pity. "I'm still as good an actress as I ever was, but these young Actor's Studio snips get all the jobs. What's the matter with me?" she asked belligerently, "Just because I drink a little—"

"I don't know, dear," Sue said honestly. "You have beauty and talent, but you act as if you wanted to destroy yourself and everyone around you. I guess I'm the only friend you have left, and I can't even figure that out. You've insulted me worse than anybody, but I just feel sorry for you."

She poured out a couple more drinks and peeked in the oven. "Maybe it's because I'm an old maid and have Mama to take care of, and maybe it's because men don't mean a thing to me, but you—" She looked at Connie curiously. "I think underneath you hate men and you're jealous of them." She gave a hiccuping smile. "Remember that leading man in Lethal Lady?"

"That horrible monster," Connie shuddered.

Sue winked slyly. "You didn't

seem to think so until he tried to cut your part down, but you got even with him all right. I remember that night you made me move my bags to another room down the hall. Afterward I peeked out and saw him sneaking toward your room and when you opened the door you were stark naked!"

Connie shuddered again but there was a gleam of animal satisfaction in her eyes. "He *was* a monster. I was black and blue all during the tryout—" She smiled maliciously. "—but it was worth it."

Sue giggled. "I'm afraid you're oversexed, dearie. I should have been a psychiatrist."

"That's what Dick Manhoff had the nerve to tell me—" Connie drew on her imagination. "—and then he practically raped me right there in his office!"

Sue let out a chubby gasp. "He didn't!"

Connie nodded dreamily. "I had a terrible fight with him. He pretended he had to examine me, and when I got undressed, he threw me down on his couch and—"

She left the rest of the scene to Sue's wide-eyed imagination, then laughed with grim satisfaction. "He never sent me a bill after that."

"Was that when you were married to Barry?"

"Oh, long before that," Connie shrugged. "After Barry started going to him it was terribly embarrassing, but I needed the treat-

ments—what's so funny," she said as Sue burst into hilarious laughter.

"You are, dearie. You must have had your hands full." She suddenly stared. "Why that must have been when Lethal Lady was running. What happened to—?"

"That monster," Connie repeated with righteous anger. "He wouldn't leave me alone even after Barry and I were married, and one day when Barry had to go to Boston to see his publisher, he came down to the apartment and pretended they were going to change one of the scenes and we had to rehearse it. He even made me put on that crepe de Chine nightgown—and he attacked me!"

"You should have had him arrested!" Sue gasped.

"How could I? I didn't want Barry to know, and the publicity would have ruined me." Her eyes glowed with the memory of it. "But I got even with him again. While Barry was still in Boston I went to his apartment one night from the show and deliberately egged him on. Afterwards I smashed everything in the place. He told me later that it cost him nearly two thousand dollars."

"He told you?" Sue said, puzzled.

Connie laughed. "Oh, we were good friends after that."

Sue shook her head. "Connie, you're impossible!"

"I guess you're right—" Connie

sipped her drink thoughtfully. "—I mean about hating men—" Unconsciously she squirmed in her seat, —and it's the only way I can get back at them. All men are just animals."

When she went to bed she thought about it with a dreamy thrill of remembrance and found herself squirming again restlessly; she had to admit Barry was a wonderful lover, and she could almost feel him beside her, then her heart was beating with a different kind of passion. She was starting a wonderful new career, and when she had completed her metamorphosis there would be plenty of other men!

Ed Brown, of Cabot & Brown, greeted Barry with a beaming smile and handed him a copy of the new book. "It's finally out, Barry, and I think with the publicity we're putting behind it, you'll get a fine sale." His smile turned a bit wry. "Of course, it's not like the good old days when Hollywood grabbed every novel we published, so that's why we have to do a little circus promotion."

"And I'm the clown," Barry grimaced.

Brown laughed and introduced a girl who came in the office. "This is Diane Ernst. She's handling our detective fiction. She'll take care of you while you're here."

She was a mousey little thing, Barry thought, as he bowed politely, but when she smiled he found himself staring; her thin, rather plain face seemed to come alive with a glowing youthful vitality and warmth, and she reminded him of Ruth. She had the same honest blue eyes, but with a glint of humor in them, and he had a feeling that they were laughing when she said soberly, "Can I have your autograph, Mr. Middleton?"

"You'll have to buy a copy," he grinned.

Brown chuckled. "She bought your manuscript, Barry. To be frank with you, we were about ready to give up on mysteries, but she talked us into it."

"It's a good novel," she said simply, and he caught a curious understanding in her eyes. "It read as if you wrote it under pressure, and it gave the story added suspense."

"Just financial pressure," he laughed, but he could tell by her amused smile that she didn't believe him. "I can still buy you a lunch though," he said, "Before I go into my trained seal act."

"I was going to suggest that," she agreed, "But Cabot & Brown are paying the bill, and—" She made a face at Brown. "That includes cocktails."

They had lunch in a little restaurant on Boylston Street and Barry couldn't stop staring at her; she was the Ruth he had married

fifteen years ago, and he found himself confessing that he hadn't written anything in nearly a year, and that he drank too much.

"Quite a few authors seem to have that weakness," she smiled, and there was no coyness in it when she said, "Perhaps what you need is a good editor." Her blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "I was dying to suggest some rewrites, but you don't tell an unhappy mystery writer how to make his crimes happy."

"How come you know so much about my private life?" he asked in honest curiosity.

She shrugged. "Every writer writes his own autobiography without being conscious of it. My father was a writer—" There was a curious maternal sadness in her expression. "He was a scientific writer, but he couldn't keep his private life out of his theorems." Her face was as tender as her smile. "Mother died when I was very young, and he was a very lonesome man who didn't know what to do about his lonesomeness. He needed a woman, but his scientific mind would never admit it." She sighed. "He died without ever realizing it, but there was a wonderful faithfulness in both his beliefs."

She had a funny little way of cocking her blonde head on one side when she was thinking. "Dad was a great detective story fan like so many eggheads, and I guess

that's how I got interested in them. There were always dozens of paper-backed books lying around. He used to say that crime was the same as a mathematical theorem, that everyone unconsciously plans murder, and that the only thing that keeps them from carrying out the act is their fear of getting caught."

Barry found his heart beating rapidly, not only from her words, but the lovely, youthful naturalness of her. He had a sudden intense desire to tell her the whole sordid story, and somehow he had a feeling she would understand, but he knew it would be the end of his dream of the freedom that lay ahead of him, and he was shocked when he realized that he was already including her in the picture. All during his two-hour ordeal at Filene's, he autographed copies of his book in a confused daze. She was right, he thought; what he needed was an editor, not only in his writing but in his life. He'd had it with Ruth, but he'd been too young, too restless, and she had never aroused him sexually.

He could feel a stirring in his blood as he thought about Diane; there was something magnetic about her simple charm and the way she used her slender body. It wasn't deliberate the way Connie did it; Diane handled her body the way an expert horsewoman handles a thoroughbred, and he had to smile at his comparison. She

would handle him the same way, but he was no thoroughbred; he was a maverick!

When she had left him at the store, she had suggested that he pick her up at the office when he got through and she would take him for a ride, and he could scarcely wait until four o'clock. He wasn't even conscious that the autograph stunt had been a failure; to him, the new book was already part of the past.

Diane had one of those baby foreign cars and they drove over the Cambridge Street bridge and along the Charles River and dined at a roadhouse, and it was like the lunch. They talked shop but he could sense the difference in their companionship; they seemed to be drawn together, groping toward each other. She stimulated his mind the way liquor did, restored his confidence in his own writing, not by flattery but by mutual interest. He wasn't only falling in love; he was like her father, a very lonesome man lost in his own mental loneliness, and he knew too that his attraction for her probably lay in the same father love.

She was at least fifteen years younger, but that was what he needed most of all; the fresh, youthful attitude toward life, and perhaps she needed a father image as a substitute for her own loneliness. She lived alone and her world was a world of books. Curiously enough, instead of weakening his

determination to go through with what he had started, it gave him an added incentive; Diane lay beyond the perfect crime! And her very ethereality made Connie seem more of a wild beast that had to be destroyed like any other sick animal. In his feverish mind he began to justify himself as he had in the beginning; this was an impersonal thing he was going to do, as impersonal as his own novels, but the accomplishment of the perfect crime and his escape from detection had suddenly become very personal.

It made him even more calculating and he went over the steps again and again until the pattern was as real as his living and breathing. Early the next morning he found a novelty shop near the hotel and bought a false mustache, then stopped at a haberdasher's and invested in a soft hat, but when he tried them on in his room, the cheap staginess of the disguise turned his stomach. That was one of the things he had loathed about Connie, her childish theatricality. Tearing the mustache to bits he watched them flutter out the window and tossed the hat after them. In the darkness he would pass unnoticed, and if he were recognized, he would put off his plan to another day. He could always use Boston for an alibi, and now he must plan more carefully than ever because his perfect crime had a perfect ending!



The last two days were like a dream, and made even more precious by the grim realization that the awakening lay ahead of him. It reminded him of the "September Song"—*these precious hours I spend with you*—but he would have to be a killer before he could be a lover. He tried to keep the details that had been burned into his mind, out of his mind, but it was like the song that kept running through his head, and he had a feeling that Diane sensed his strain, and she reacted the way Ruth had. He had told her all about Connie, and she said, "Why not get away for a while so you can start a new book?"

"I'm broke," he said with a despairing gesture.

The eyes were laughing at him again. "Poverty has never kept a man from writing—or from drink."

He laughed with her, and then he said impulsively, "What if I could get away and get a divorce?"

"Let's talk about that in the epilogue," she grinned.

As four o'clock Wednesday afternoon came along, he found his hands trembling so he could hardly write his name, and, ironically, his book sales had jumped and he found himself trying desperately to be polite to a line of fluttery women buyers who eyed him as if he were Boris Karloff. He had told Diane that he would pick her up at the office, and she had suggested

their having dinner and she would see him off on the nine-o'clock train, but he knew he would have to make some excuse so he could catch an early plane. The thought of meeting her for the last time was frightening, and he had a feeling that she would be able to read his guilty mind. Going back to his hotel he called her and the only excuse he could think of was what he was going to tell Mike Ferris; he was sick and thought he had better sleep until train time, and when she said, "Take care of yourself," he hung up and found he was crying.

Taking a drink from the bottle he had in his room to steady his raw nerves, he phoned Mike and he didn't have to put on an act; he had a panicky feeling that his heart might give out any moment. "Just a slight attack, Mike," he told him, "but I'd appreciate it if you would meet me at the train when it gets in at midnight. I've just enough money for my fare, and won't have enough left for a taxi home."

Mike chuckled sympathetically. "I'll be there, and cheer up. Brown called me this noon and said the sale had gone even better than they expected, and that he'd try and arrange another advance for you."

He hung up and sat looking at the bottle, and it was Connie he saw; Connie wasting life the way she wasted liquor, spilling it all over her breasts, breasts that had never known a baby, and perhaps

that was what was wrong with both of them. He could see Diane's breasts; lovely, young, hopeful breasts that would swell with love, and his heart was swelling with the thought of it until his mind came back to the present. He took another drink and wished he could lie down just as he'd told Diane he was going to do, and temporarily forget the five hours that lay ahead. Now that he was finally face to face with it, the thought terrified him. There were so many dangerous and devious steps to travel.

The liquor gave him a feeling of recklessness, and he decided to take a chance on his check-out time being discovered. Phoning the desk, he told them he was taking the nine-o'clock train to New York and wanted to leave a call for eight fifteen. He could sneak out without paying his bill, and call back tomorrow, saying that in his haste to catch his train he had forgotten it.

Now he had to make sure that Connie would be at the apartment when he got back, and he put in a call to Sue's home in Mount Vernon, and to his relief Connie answered the phone. Sue had gone to the store, she said gaily, and he could tell by her voice that she'd been drinking. There was a tense excitement too behind her volubility and he felt a twinge of uneasiness at the thought that she really might have gotten a job, but when

he mentioned it, she laughed throatily and said, "I haven't even thought about the theatre since I've been here. I've thought about you though, darling," she purred. "I've missed you and I'll be waiting for you with open arms!"

He shuddered and stared at the receiver in his shaking hand; it suddenly looked like a gun, and it was, he thought grimly; when he had picked it up to call her he was actually committing murder! His nervousness was getting worse and he thought he might as well take an earlier plane; when he got to New York he could go to a movie until it was time to return to the apartment. Pouring himself a drink, he stood in the window and gazed down at the Charles River winding in and out of the city, and his heart gave a flutter of renewed hope as he remembered yesterday's drive in Diane's little car. They'd stopped for a drink at a little cafe on the water's edge and when he again mentioned the possibility of his getting a divorce, she didn't smile the way she did the first time; She said, "I never thought I'd fall in love this way, especially with a married man." Then she added with a wan smile. "Let's leave it to fate."

He wondered if his fate was like that river, twisting and turning, and would it end in a safe harbor? He saw it was after six, and packing his small bag, he went out, locking the door after him and

slipped the tagged key into his pocket. It would be a good thing to show when Mike met him; he could say that he'd forgotten to leave it at the desk. When he got out of the elevator on the ground floor he went directly to the side entrance and hailed a cab. It was starting to rain and he was glad he had left earlier. By the time he got to the airport it was coming down heavily and he began to think he was running in luck; there was a New York plane scheduled to leave immediately, and there were only a few passengers, but the fog held it up for an hour and when they finally took off they ran into another storm. The plane was a small, two-engine Convair and shuddered like a ship in a heavy sea, but, curiously he felt no fear except the ironic thought that if they crashed Connie's suicide note would be found in his pocket.

Even when the pilot announced that LaGuardia was closed in and that they would have to land in Newark, he felt calm; he would leave it to fate, just as Diane had said. Fate had seemed to direct the whole thing from the very beginning, and if he got in too late to finish the job and meet Mike, it meant just a postponement. Then fear took possession of him; fate had a macabre sense of humor!

It rained all day Wednesday and

Connie had the same pent-up feeling that she had before opening nights, but this was both an opening and a closing and she knew she had to stay sober. With a slight shiver she remembered the day "Lethal Lady" had opened in town; they had rehearsed all afternoon and she'd had the same feeling she always had as a child, the getting-ready-for-a-party feeling.

There was a wonderful exhilaration about it, a youthful expectancy and the sheer joy of anticipating the party and knowing she would be admired. The anticipation was still there, but alcohol had taken the place of youthful spirits, and during the last dress rehearsal she had nipped at a bottle in her bag.

When the director said wearily, "All right, kids, back at eight o'clock," he took one look at Connie, then he bundled her in a cab, drove her to his apartment, undressed her and shoved her bodily under a hot shower, followed by an ice-cold shower, and grimly repeating the process. Connie had enjoyed it hugely, but when she had tried to seduce him he shook his head and said, "Connie, you're just wasting your time, and it's running out just as it does for all whores, but tonight you're going to play a drunk sober!"

Weren't all the famous women of history whores, she thought with a nervous giggle; well, she would make history too! She must be careful though; tonight, just as the

director had said, she must play a drunk sober, and she'd be another hit! It was a terrible temptation when Sue went to visit her mother at the hospital; she could feel the getting-ready-for-a-party excitement mounting, but she kept her eye on the clock and kept whispering to herself, "Tomorrow at this time I'll be starting a new life!"

She had had only four or five drinks when Barry called and was thankful that Sue wasn't there and didn't have to put on an act, but she couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice, and then she realized that he thought she was drunk and almost burst into hysterical laughter. "I'll be waiting for you with open arms, darling!"

That's exactly what she would be doing, she thought triumphantly as she hung up, and it reminded her of the sheer nightgowns she had worn in "Lethal Lady." She had kept them after the play closed and they were still in a cardboard box in the hall closet. Tonight she would put one of them on, just as she had on her opening night. All she had to do was follow the script!

When Sue came home, full of mama and the tragedy of growing old, it gave her more courage than the cocktails before dinner, and she was already rehearsing her part. "One of those frightful headaches, darling," she told her, "But I'll be all right if I get a good night's sleep."

Sue always got sentimental aft-

er visiting her mother, and she wept copiously as they watched "Wagon Train" on tv. "They were old pioneers," she said tearfully, but Connie didn't agree with her. Her wagon train was going to be the Chief! She could play a bereaved widow with the best of them, she thought as she looked at the homespun heroine on the screen, but it wouldn't take her that long to find a homespun widower! What westerns needed was more sex, not those crinoline creeps that hid their bodies under yards of cloth and inhibitions. Why was it the Indian braves and the stalwart cowboys were always stripped to the waist? They were worse strip teasers than the women!

She knew Sue was relieved when she repeated her "splitting headache" act and said she thought she would go to bed and take a couple of sleeping pills. Sue was already nodding and didn't even say good night when they parted in the upstairs hall.

Connie waited until she heard her snoring, then she crept down the back stairs and unlocking the kitchen door, closed it after her but, left the key in the lock. She could hear a jukebox blaring as she walked down the sloping hill to the station and she was suddenly conscious that the jukebox had been drowned out by a train—and it was leaving the station! She watched the headlight as it disappeared in the foggy night, wailing

like a lost soul, and it was her career, she thought hysterically, then she saw the ramshackle cab pulling away from the station taxi stand. Running to it, she jumped in and told the driver she wanted to go to New York. She didn't even bother to ask the price; she had some money of her own and good old Sue had insisted on her taking twenty-five dollars so that she could get herself a decent dress at that new Mount Vernon women's shop.

It was an old sedan and she sat in the front seat with the driver, and she knew he was ogling her crossed legs, but she was in no mood for exhibitionism, and she put her feet primly on the floor and smoothed down her skirt. She was glad now that she had missed the train, and she would take a cab back. It was safer because coming out on the after-theatre train someone might recognize her. The thought of that danger had never crossed her mind and she felt a sudden panic; if she ran into anyone going into the apartment building or leaving it, her beautiful alibi would be ruined! That was the one thing that stood between her and her future and she mustn't fail.

She let out a sigh of relief when they reached midtown Manhattan; it was a clammy, drizzling rain and no one would be out. Telling the driver to stop at the corner she thrust a ten-dollar bill in his hand, and as she hurried down the street

she could see the Metropolitan tower. It was only nine o'clock and she had plenty of time to set the scene! Halfway down the block she stopped in the shelter of a porte-cochere and watched the dark entrance of their building a few doors away, then after a flut-tery moment she made a dash for it. She was panting now in her excitement and fumbling in her bag for the key to the downstairs door, it slipped out of her hands, the contents spilling all over the tile floor. There was only a shaded light over the brass nameplate in the tiny entrance hall so she couldn't see, but with animal instinct she got down on her hands and knees and picked up everything she could find with madly groping fingers. She couldn't even remember what had been in the bag, but she knew she mustn't leave any evidence. And there was no key!

Getting up she stared around helplessly; she had to get in some way! In desperation she pressed one of the top floor buttons and even as she heard the welcome buzzer that unlocked the door she realized it wouldn't do her any good; she couldn't get into the apartment! The buzzing was like a mocking snarl in her ears, and as she mechanically pushed the door open she saw the key lying in the corner. With a choked gasp she snatched it up and hurrying into the lobby she started up the stairs when she heard footsteps above

her. They were moving down and seemed to come from the third floor and she might have time to get into the apartment before they reached her floor. Her heart was beating wildly as she ran up the short flight and along the hall and she was putting the key in the lock when she saw the man over her shoulder. It was Muller, the janitor and she knew she was caught, but he turned without seeing her and went on downstairs.

Letting herself into the dark apartment she closed the door softly and went straight to the kitchen where she gulped down a stiff drink from the bottle of gin on the refrigerator. It brought back her courage and she found herself laughing hysterically. The raw liquor was like fire and after another long swallow she felt a dreamy calmness and when she turned on the lights it made her think of an opening curtain. Now she must set the stage! Getting undressed, she remembered the crepe de Chine nightgown she had worn in *Lethal Lady*, and opening the hall closet door she reached up for the cardboard box on the top shelf. In her haste she knocked Barry's winter overcoat off the rack, and it lay, draped over a stuffed laundry bag. It looked like a body lying there and she gave a little convulsive shiver as she took the gown out of the box, but the heavy lavender scent that rose from it brought back reassuring memories.

Tossing the box back in the closet, she left the door half closed and looked at herself in the mirror as she slipped the gossamer fabric over her head. It was like a transparent film over her naked body and gave it the seductive effect that had made such a sensation in the play. Turning slowly she could feel the excitement mounting within her; her mouth felt dry and she had a feverish desire for another drink, but she knew she must stay sober. Going to the desk she dug through the pile of manuscripts and took out the gun. The butt of it felt cool in her hand and restored her calmness. She was an actress now, and she would play her part the way she had always played it!

Turning the bed covers back she slipped the gun under the pillows and turned the hi-fi on low, then she put out all the lights but the heavy shaded one on the bookcase. It gave the room a soft glow, and as the strains of "*Scheherazade*" rose on the air she could feel her breasts palpitating the way they did on opening nights. The small clock on the bedside table said twenty after nine; she had plenty of time and now she needed a drink badly, but she would treat it as medicine and just take enough to keep her courage up.

Carefully measuring out the gin she filled the rest of the glass with water and surveyed herself again in the hall closet mirror; her body

looked soft and milky-white through the gauzy material, the shadows mysterious, her full breasts accented by their rosy tips. There was a flushed smile on her face as she raised her glass; she was onstage, in the most thrilling role she had ever played! Her heart fluttered at the thought of it, then it rose in her throat when she heard the loud knock on the door.

She stood motionless, her body rigid with fear, staring at the black door; it couldn't be Barry this early! And he wouldn't knock; he had his own key. The knocking came again, louder, and then she heard Bob Riva's guttural voice. "I saw your lights on, Connie. How's about giving a poor man a drink?"

She was trapped; if she didn't let him in he would make a great joke about it later and she would have no alibi. Her first reaction was impotent rage, and then as she opened the door and saw he was drunk, her feline cunning saw an escape. If she could seduce him as she had her stupid lover in the play, he wouldn't dare let on that he'd seen her!

Putting on her sultriest smile she murmured with mocking modesty, "Barry's in Boston."

He nodded and deliberately ran his eyes over her body. "That's why I stopped in for a drink."

She laughed and he missed the exultant tone in her voice as she motioned toward the kitchen. "Help yourself," she said careless-

ly, "Barry will be home in a little while. He's taking the nine o'clock train."

"We've got lots of time," he chuckled as he went in the kitchen, and when he came out with a drink in his hand she took a long sip from hers, knowing his eyes were devouring the youthfulness of her body. She felt no sexual excitement; he was just a means to an end, and she had plenty of time to make him a co-conspirator! He was an animal just like Muller the janitor.

Putting her drink down on the bedside table, she turned with a provocative gesture and was surprised to see the sardonic leer in his gaze. "Always the ham, aren't you?" he said. His dark, unshaven face was flushed with both liquor and lust, and with a sudden deep laugh his hairy arm reached out and in one swift movement he tore the nightgown from her as if it were a loose rag. "That's more like it," he chuckled, studying her as if she were a professional model. "You look much more natural naked. A girl's soft body with the face of a devil. Do you mind if I put a pillow over your face?"

She let out a snarl of rage and tossed her drink in his face, but he ducked it and grabbed her, cold-bloodedly, throwing her back on the bed, and when she kicked viciously and tried to claw him, he hit her in the jaw with his hairy fist. "No more acting, Lady Go-

diva," he grunted with grim pleasure, "I've been looking forward to this, ever since your naked performance."

Even in her stunned semi-consciousness she reveled in his brutality, and her animal cunning was heightened by it. Her eyes slid to the bedside clock when he got up and poured himself a drink, and she said, "I need one too."

She rubbed her swollen jaw with a twisted smile as he brought the drinks back and stood looking down at her. "And I need you, Riva."

He grinned drunkenly, shrugging his heavy shoulders in derision, but she could see the desire returning, and when he put down his drink she snatched the gun from underneath the pillows and jumped out of bed. His swarthy chin dropped open at the sight of it, and she let out a shrill, hysterical laugh. "Yes, I need you, Riva! You're my lover, and I'll tell the police you killed my husband!" She jerked the gun toward the front door. "Now get out of here, you filthy beast, and if you mention seeing me tonight—!"

She brought the gun around again and he backed up, terrified at the wild animal grimace on her face. "You wouldn't dare use that," he stammered.

Her laugh was a snarl now as she remembered her role. "I already have, and it would be a pleasure to shoot you!"

Frozen with fear he turned toward the low steps, then his bloodshot eyes stopped at the half open closet door, and when he saw the overcoat in a tumbled heap on the floor he let out a hoarse cry and ran headlong out of the apartment.

The slamming of the door was like a gunshot and brought her back to reality and her shocked glance went to the clock again. It was nearly ten-thirty! Trembling with excitement she put the gun back under the pillow, then she straightened the bedclothes and taking the two glasses to the kitchen, rinsed them hurriedly. Going into the bathroom she turned the shower on and the stream of cold water calmed her screaming nerves. Staring at herself in the mirror while she dried her body she saw her jaw was turning black and blue and she covered it with makeup powder. Barry wouldn't notice it in the dim light; his eyes would be on her body!

Snapping off the bathroom light she thought she heard a cab stopping outside, and she was running to the bed when she saw the torn nightgown on the floor. Snatching it up she shoved it under the bedclothes, and pulled them over her legs as she propped herself up against the pillows. Her heart was pounding like mad and she squeezed her breasts convulsively trying to control her panic, and strained her ears listening for his step above the low sound of the



hi-fi, but there was nothing but a distant door slam from somewhere in the building and she realized it hadn't been Barry.

She sat, rigidly, staring around her to see if she had overlooked anything, and when she saw her photograph on the bookcase, the room again became a stage set, and she was suddenly calm. Slipping one hand under the pillow her fingers closed around the cold butt of the revolver, and she waited with a fixed smile on her face.

Barry let his breath out slowly as the plane's wheels settled on the runway. There was very little wind and a steady drizzle of rain fell through the low-lying fog, giving the night an ominous silence. Getting a cab he sat back in the dark interior and went over what he knew would be the last few steps of his journey. His mind was working methodically now; he would have to allow a half hour to an hour for the sleeping pills to put her under completely, and a half hour to get up to Grand Central. He glanced at his watch in a passing light and shook his head; it was much too early even if Connie had gotten home. There would be too many people about at this hour, and when he had finished the job he wanted to go directly up to the station to meet Mike; he knew his nerves wouldn't

stand the strain of waiting after he had committed his crime. He had planned the time element purposefully; those last fatal steps must be taken fast before he himself cracked. After he had met Mike and returned to the apartment, it would be out of his hands; the law would take over.

As the cab went through the Holland Tunnel his thoughts were flickering like the passing lights and the subterranean hum seemed to be in his mind. He would hide in a neighborhood movie and no one would recognize him in the darkness. Telling the driver to let him off at Twenty-third Street and Fourth Avenue he walked over toward Lexington. It was still drizzling and there were only a few pedestrians and an occasional car making a swishing sound on the wet pavement, but he hesitated when he neared the lighted entrance of the theatre. He went there often, and he was afraid that the girl in the ticket booth might remember later that she had seen him.

From where he stood he could see she was reading a magazine, and walking quickly to the window he shoved a dollar through the opening. She didn't even look up as she punched the ticket machine, and when he entered the lobby luck was again with him; the ticket taker was talking to a man beside him and his head was turned away when he absent-mindedly tore the ticket in half.

Barry let out a sigh of relief as he sank into a seat in the smoking loges in the rear of the auditorium. He was dying for a cigarette, but he was afraid to light one for fear someone would see his face, and he shrank back with a shudder of fear when the man next to him lit his pipe. He had taken no notice of the billboards when he came in, and he wasn't even conscious of the actors on the screen or the sound. The screen was just a translucent glow of shifting scenes, the heads of the people in front of him silhouetted against it like a black frieze. He could feel himself relaxing, and he smiled grimly to himself in the darkness; each one of those silhouettes, he thought, had its individual worries and ills and was seeking a temporary escape, but *his* escape wasn't going to be temporary! The finality of his thoughts put his nerves on edge again; when they left the theatre they would be returning to their homes and their dull lives, but when he left he would be facing death!

The distant wail of a passing ambulance siren rose above the sound inside and he tried to control his trembling by keeping his eyes fixed on the girl in front of him instead of the flickering screen; he had to concentrate on something to still his growing claustrophobia. It seemed to help him until he gradually realized that there was something familiar

about the girl's head. She turned slightly as if conscious of his scrutiny, and when he caught a glimpse of her strong profile he found himself gripping the arms of his seat, his heart pounding. It was Ruth.

She hadn't seen him yet, but he was afraid if he moved he would attract her attention. He sat stiffly, hardly daring to breathe, and even in his shocked state he had the same little boy feeling toward her; she looked so cool and calm, and his mind was in a torment wondering what she would do if she saw him and then remembered it the next day when she heard about Connie's suicide. She knew he was desperate; would she suspect him when she read in the paper that he had been in Boston at the time of the tragedy?

He had a sudden impulse to touch her, to speak to her, and leaned forward, then sank back with a spasmodic jerk. It was fate again; there was nothing he could do now. If she saw him he would have to throw himself on her mercy the next day, tell her that he had found Connie dead when he got home, and that if they found out he had been there they would suspect him of murder. But in his heart he knew she wouldn't lie.

Even as the thoughts whirled through his mind, the picture on the screen ended, and when the house lights went on he knew there was no escape; he felt like a criminal transfixed in the naked

glare of a floodlight. Ruth was getting up, and he sat, waiting, his face a white mask of guilt, but she didn't look at him as she went up the aisle. Sinking down in his seat he rested his lowered head in one hand and it felt like an icicle against his sweating forehead. Closing his eyes the pounding of his heart sounded louder than the music and the announcement of coming attractions, then darkness came again, and when the music rose he could no longer hear his heart, and it gave him a curious calmness. Fate was running this thing; he was just the implement. There was an illuminated clock at the right of the stage and when he saw it was nearly ten-thirty he got up and went out.

The rain had turned to a clammy mist that seemed to penetrate his whole body, but he liked the sensation it gave him, a sort of dreamy destiny. Walking around the park he approached his building on the opposite side of the street, and when he saw the windows of his apartment lit up it was like turning on an electric current in his veins. It brought back the old feeling of panic and he stood in the shelter of a brownstone stoop until he could control his nerves, then he moved on to where he was directly opposite the dark entrance.

The lights in the apartment were dim but there were vague shadows on the two front windows and he could feel his heart pounding

again when he caught a glimpse of the top of Connie's head as she went to the little bar in the corner of the living room. There was an unusual swiftness in her movements, and he was wondering what caused it when he saw another silhouette outlined against the window. It was Riva!

As he let out an angry curse he was conscious of the irony of it; Riva, who had put the idea in his mind, was now blocking it! It was as if fate had led him on until the final moment and then had laughed at him derisively the way Connie did, but, curiously enough, it steadied his nerves; there was nothing he could do about it. There were no shadows on the window panes now and he tried to light a cigarette but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn't get it lit; it was as soggy and limp as his heart, and he dropped it on the sidewalk.

He tried to make out the time on his wrist watch but the face was wet, and he was about to give up and go on to Pete's for a much-needed drink when he heard a door slam and it seemed to come from his apartment. Staring across the street he saw the bathroom light go on, and at the same moment he saw Riva coming out the ground floor entrance. There was the same swift movement in his actions but he was staggering, and Barry smiled grimly despite his pounding heart. They had had

their usual drunken argument, and fate was with him again.

He waited until he saw the bathroom light go out, and after a quick look up and down the street, unlocked the entrance door and tiptoed up the one flight of stairs. The only sound in the building was coming from the hi-fi; it was "Scheherazade" and his laugh was a silent scream in his throat. Well, he had a tale to tell, and the sultan's bride wouldn't save her life this time!

He found himself suddenly calm and his hand wasn't even shaking when he unlocked the door and let himself in; this was the moment of death that he had so often written about, but now he was actually living it! His mind was filled with the thrill of creation and the power to end creation, and when Connie smiled at him lovingly there was nothing but hate in his heart. He was the master criminal and she was the mistress of evil. It was just as impersonal as his stories; she was a naked harpy, a bird of prey that had to be wiped out before her talons sank into another victim.

Even as she said, "Hello, darling!" he noticed the discoloration on her swollen jaw, and then he remembered the look on Riva's face the time she had flaunted her nakedness before him and he suddenly knew what had happened while he was standing out there in the rain, and whatever compunc-

tion he'd felt turned into grim vengeance.

"Hi," he said, and his voice sounded as taut as a wire about to snap, so he pretended a pained weariness as he put his small bag in the closet, and when he saw his overcoat lying on the floor his heart almost stopped beating. He couldn't control his shaking when he picked it up and hung it on the rack; he knew Connie couldn't see him as he stuck his hand in the pocket, and the feel of the pills started his heart pumping again.

Slipping them in his pants pocket he closed the closet door and managed a wry smile when she said, "How did it go, Middleton?"

He could detect the strain in her own voice, and he understood why, but he just shrugged, ignoring the invitation in her eyes and the seductive pose. "It was pretty grim, but it sold a few books. How was it out at Sue's?"

"Also grim," she smiled wanly, "But I got a good rest. I missed you," she added, and the lower half of her body was uncovered as she stretched across the bed and reached out with her arm to turn the hi-fi up.

He stood looking at her curved back and legs and he had a sudden desire to laugh aloud; there was something ghastly humorous about the situation. They were like two animals maneuvering around to get the advantage. She turned back and saw the twisted

grimace on his face. "I'd love a drink," she purred. "It might help me to get to sleep."

"Why don't you take some sleeping pills," he said tightly.

"I did." She propped herself up against the pillows with a sensuous movement. "I guess I was sort of excited about your coming home."

Going to the small bar he poured out a couple of drinks and took them into the kitchen and made enough racket getting the ice tray out of the refrigerator so she could hear it above the music. As he dropped the fistful of sleeping pills in her glass he smiled shakily as he remembered the research he'd done on a story he was working on, and what the lethal amount of barbituates was; if she had taken a couple of pills before he came in, the seven or eight he was putting in her drink would be just about enough to put her in a deep coma.

Emptying the ice tray he glanced swiftly around the tiny kitchen; pulled the handle of the narrow French window down so that it closed tightly, and lifting the grating on the stove, turned off the pilot light. The refrigerator was an electric so he didn't have to worry about that.

He could feel his heart pounding again and held the two drinks in front of him for a moment to make sure his hands were steady, then he carried them into the living room. Connie held out her

arms, her face flushed with desire, as he approached the bed, but he put her drink down on the small table and turned away quickly, afraid if he looked at her he would give himself away.

Her voice had a throaty petulance. "Aren't you even going to kiss me?"

He shook his head irritably, trying to keep his voice steady. "Have your drink first. I want to look at the mail." Going to the desk he lit a cigarette and went through the small pile of unopened bills without seeing them. He didn't dare look at her, but it was raining steadily now, and the window made a perfect looking glass and he could see her raise the glass to her mouth. She was gulping it down the way she usually did, but now there was anger in her jerky gestures, and she snatched the covers up over her legs.

Watching her tensely, it was like watching some shadowy drama on a television screen, and the hi-fi was supplying the musical background! She finished the drink quickly and lay back and he thought he could see her eyes close, and after a few minutes he went to the bathroom, closing the door after him. When he came out she seemed to be sleeping soundly, her breasts rising and falling with her slow breathing, her hands at her sides, the covers pulled up again so that only the upper half of her body showed.

The feline come-on, he thought grimly, and went back to the desk, and as he watched her in the window he felt like a Peeping Tom. He had looked at his watch in the bathroom, and it was only a little after eleven; there was plenty of time but he had to make sure she was far enough under so that she wouldn't recover consciousness when he carried her into the kitchen. Trying to hold his hand steady on the desk he kept his eyes glued on the luminous dial of his wristwatch, and as "Scheherazade" came to an end he thought he could hear his heart pounding in the sudden silence.

A sudden silence like that often awakened sleepers, and he jerked around, staring at her, but she didn't move, and his rasping breath turned into a sigh of relief when the music started again, and again he had the hysterical impulse to laugh aloud. It was "Salome."

Getting up slowly he looked at her for a moment and his heart was beating like his brain as he went to the kitchen. Opening and closing the refrigerator loudly he glanced around the edge of the kitchen door at the bed, then turned back and taking the suicide note from his pocket, dropped it on the linoleum. It lay there, a white patch in the darkness, except for the scrawled writing, and he stared at it in frozen fascination, then lowering the oven door of the stove he turned on all four burners

and listened to the hiss of gas.

Curtain going up, Connie's excited heart whispered when she heard the door open and Barry appeared in the hall but her loving smile felt frozen and her animal instinct told her something was wrong. He seemed tired and irritable and instead of looking at her body as he usually did, his eyes were on her swollen jaw and she couldn't control her panic; he must have seen Riva! Even as the thought entered her mind it thrilled her. He was jealous!

It gave her a wonderful feeling of power and she tried to make her smile seductive as she stretched lazily so that the covers slipped down over her knees. He was like all men, just an animal, and after he had put his bag in the closet she deliberately waited until he closed the door and turning over on her stomach, reached out to turn the hi-fi on louder. She was proud of her buttocks and had often admired them for the lustful interest they aroused in men; she couldn't understand why, but she had sensed it ever since she was a little girl.

When she turned back she caught the twisted grimace on his face, and for a delicious moment she wondered if it wouldn't be safer to shoot him afterward, and again she felt a thrill of power. "I'd love a drink," she purred, and

when he hesitated she lay back against the pillows with a yawning smile. Rubbing her breasts she watched him go to the bar and pour out a couple of drinks and when he took them into the kitchen to get ice she knew from the racket he made that he was impatient for her body.

When he came back she held out her arms, but he put her drink down on the table and turned away and she felt a sudden sadistic pleasure; she could have him any time she wanted him just as she could any other man! "Aren't you even going to kiss me?" she asked petulantly, and she wanted to laugh aloud when she saw him go to the desk and realized he was staring at her reflection in the window. He was no different than that dirty janitor! She suddenly remembered him calling her a strip tease woman and she smothered the shrill laugh in her tight throat. What was any actress but a strip tease artist, whether it was mental or physical? And what was a man? An animal afraid of his own nakedness, his own carnal desires!

Lifting the glass she drank it down thirstily; there was plenty of time! It didn't make any difference when she got back to Mount Vernon; she would have her big moment first, just as she had in Lethal Lady. She felt a sudden, frenzied triumph even as she realized her frenzy was in her hot body. It made her angry and her

one desire now was to make the staring reflection in the window succumb to her charms.

Finishing the drink she lay back, her whole body trembling with the thought of it and how he never could resist the sight of her nakedness. She watched him through slitted eyes, pretending to be asleep, and her body writhed in a sudden ecstasy, her breasts panting as she watched him get up and go to the bathroom. She could hear the toilet flush and her senses were flushing turbulently when he came out, and she could feel his eyes devouring her, and she found herself relaxing even though her heart was pounding. So many times she had waited like this, knowing that his body would be pressed to hers, his arms around her. She had forgotten her role of murderess and her sweating body writhed in palpitant expectation.

She felt a sudden numbness envelop her, a strange lassitude, and her mascaraed eyelids felt like heavy curtains; she could hardly hold them open as she watched him sit down at the desk again, and his figure seemed strangely out of focus. He must have made her drink terribly strong, she thought hazily, and it gave her a drowsy thrill; their love-making was always like that, a sort of silent, consuming passion.

She could only make him out indistinctly when he got up and went to the kitchen, probably to

get another drink, and her glazed eyes automatically went to the empty glass on the bedside table, then she stared at it in sudden, terrified realization. *He had drugged her!* She tried to sit up, but the scream that rose in her throat was just a muffled sob, and when she smelled the gas her heart began pounding violently but it was like the beating of a distant surf.

He was going to kill her! That was why he had spiked her drink; he was going to carry her into the kitchen, and even as the thought exploded in her mind she remembered the story he had been working on and how he had asked her to write her impressions from taking gas. She had written her own death notice!

A nightmarish hysteria took possession of her, and she dug her clawed hands into her heaving breasts and slapped her cheeks in a desperate effort to stay awake. She felt as if she were drowning in that distant, pounding surf, and with a last glimmer of self-preservation her hand fumbled for the revolver under the pillow and her fingers closing on it brought her back to semi-consciousness.

Sliding drunkenly out of bed she staggered to her feet and lunged toward the low steps, and as she fell against the open kitchen doorway she saw his stiffening figure silhouetted against the narrow, rain-spattered window. The scream in her throat was now a mad-

dened cry of vicious rage, and lifting the gun she fired at the advancing shadow. The deafening roar in the tiny kitchen blasted her out of her coma, and when she saw him clutch at his stomach her scream was a hoarse snarl of triumph, but even as he let out a gasping curse he dragged her toward him, jerking the gun from her hand and when it went off again it was like a searing burst of flame in her face.

She felt no pain and she was dimly conscious of his slumping to the floor, the gun still in his hand, and of her body falling back against the open-kitchen door. After that there was nothing but a hissing silence and a soft thud as the door swung shut.

Muller, the janitor stood staring down at the naked body sprawled on the floor, his tobacco-stained jaw hanging open, and there was a curious gleam of frustration in his watery eyes.

The Medical Examiner got up from his post-mortem with a rheumatic twinge of pain and motioned to the two cops to remove the corpses, then he looked at Muller with a bored gesture. "When did you find them?"

Muller's eyes were still staring at the woman as the cops elbowed him out of the way, and throwing a blanket over the body, picked it



up and carried it out of the apartment. The medic repeated the question and Muller said shakily, "Early this morning. Some of the tenants complained of smelling gas, and when I came upstairs I could tell it was coming from here. I couldn't get the kitchen door open at first—" He jerked a hand over his shoulder. "—she was wedged against it, but when I finally got it open—there they were."

He stepped back as the cops returned; one of them twisted the gun out of the dead man's clenched hand, and handed it to the doctor, then they carried the corpse out. Carelessly holding the gun by the barrel, the medic stooped over and picked up the wrinkled sheet of paper with the scrawled writing on it, and shook

his head. "She must have been drunk when she wrote this." Folding the note around the gun, he dropped them in his bag and closed it with a grunt. "They sure weren't taking any chances on bungling the job."

"They was always fightin'," Muller told him, and his eyes had a reminiscent gleam, "But I guess he didn't want to leave her. They say she was a pretty good actress once. They were both up against it; he was four months behind with the rent, and only yesterday the landlord said he was goin' to dispossess 'em."

"Well, they won't have to worry about that now," the medic said grimly. Opening his report book he scrawled, "Double Suicide" with a careless flourish at the bottom of the page, and flipped the book closed.



# MANHUNT

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MAGDA SANDERSON peered wistfully through the frosty window. The leafless trees lining the drive seemed to be waving goodbye, just as she'd done when Chuck left shortly after three. Was it really only an hour ago or was it a day or even a week? The timeless, snowy landscape offered her no reassurance. Why on earth had they picked this weekend to come up and close the cottage?

Of course, yesterday it had seemed merely an early-winter lark. "Why don't we take a spin up to the



BY

JAMES WALZ

## NIGHTMARE

*Magda screamed, "I'll kill you!" The man lifted the axe. Magda closed her eyes and pulled both triggers of the shotgun.*

lake ourselves instead of getting old Krupp to button down the place for the season," suggested her husband. "After all, the baby isn't due for another two months and Dr. Cannon told you a little exercise might be a darned good thing."

With moonlight sparking the snowcapped hills, the drive had been beautiful, and in the morning a fresh whiteness had turned the woods about the cottage into a fairyland. Even the storm that started just before noon pleased Magda. It was exciting to imagine being cut off from the world with danger all around and her stalwart Chuck there to protect her. Then that damn' phone call had spoiled everything.

"Sure, it's inconvenient," Chuck had admitted, rubbing a hand across his dark brushcut, "but we can work it out all right. And after all, what the boss says goes. You want your rising young executive to keep on rising, don't you Mag?"

"You know I do Chuck," she'd said with that bright little smile she used so often lately to mask the tiny doubts that nibbled mouselike at her happiness. "Only . . ."

"I'll drive on to Weston and contact this Mr. Bigelow while you pack the stuff here. Then tomorrow I'll pick you up and we can stop in the village to see the Krupps."

Struggling into his overcoat he'd added, "Now don't worry, this little snow flurry will be over soon.

There's plenty of food and fuel on hand. You've got the radio for company and if anything does come up you can phone Mrs. Krupp. Actually you're probably safer here than in the city. But, if it will make you feel any better, I'll just load that old twelve-gauge of mine with buckshot. Here, let's have a big smile and a kiss to keep me warm."

Idly tracing the frost patterns with her fingertip, Magda shivered as a sharp blast of wind made the cottage sigh and creak. So here I am, she mused smoothing her maternity jacket, here I am in solitary confinement. Nervously laughing at her pun she turned from the window to the comforting glow of the fireplace. Being alone had always bothered her and it seemed that pregnancy merely intensified this feeling.

Chuck was so strong, so self-assured. No matter what the situation he always radiated confidence like some strong and dependable beacon. And Magda was only a mirror. Without his light to reflect, shadows crept in and nameless worries ate into the quicksilver of her conscious thought.

She ran a comb through her black hair and then tried to shake off her mood by busily tidying up the cottage and packing the clothes and knickknacks they would take back to the city. As darkness sifted through the afternoon sky the snowfall ended and the wind subsided slightly. Only an occasional

gust reminded her that the cottage still lay under winter's icy hand. When the last trace of daylight faded, she curled up on the couch before the fire and began working a crossword puzzle to smother the obscure and formless fears that still tiptoed through her mind. Absently she reached over and flicked on the radio.

Above the crackle of static Magda caught the words of the announcer. ". . . Woodside Mental Home. All Lake Indigo residents and all motorists are cautioned to be on the lookout. The escapee, Carl Johanson, is thirty-three, blond and of medium height; he weighs 160. This man . . ." The static cut in abruptly and then faded. ". . . we repeat, regarded as potentially very dangerous. If you have any information, please contact . . ."

Magda lost the rest of the sentence in a surge of panic that welled up within her. She sat there frozen, staring blankly as the radio droned on. The pencil clutched in her fingers suddenly snapped and the sound released her. She quickly checked the door and window fastenings. Finally she remembered the phone. Stabbing frantically at the dial she managed to get Mrs. Krupp on the third try. The German woman's placid tone soothed and comforted her.

"Oh yah, Mrs. Sanderson, I hear the radio. What, you out there all alone? Well, you don't worry. Just

keep door locked. I send over my boy Paul, he's home from the Lakes now. You know Paul is big engineer but winter comes he gets vacation. Yah, too much ice even for ore boats. I have him bring you back here to our place for tonight. He don't say much but is strong and smart, can give you good protection. You be just fine with my Paul."

"Thank you, oh thank you Mrs. Krupp," sighed Magda. "I . . . Hello, hello . . ." The line was dead. Confidence drained from her like molasses oozing from a broken bottle. She tried the radio again but got only bursts of static. Carefully she inspected the windows and tried the door a second time. Outside the snow muffled the landscape whitely.

I must keep calm, she reminded herself. There's nothing to worry about, nothing at all. Chuck told me that. Mrs. Krupp told me too. I simply must keep calm. The nails of her clenched hands bit deeply into the palms but Magda didn't notice.

"I'd better pack a few things for tonight," she said aloud. Her voice sounded oddly strained and unfamiliar. As she headed toward the bedroom, the lights dimmed and then became brighter than ever. Oh God, not that; if the power fails . . . She refused to complete the thought. A disconnected prayer began forming in her mind just as the lamps winked out. Only the

glowing embers on the hearth relieved the inky blackness.

Hastily she piled fresh wood on the fire and huddled close, trying to draw some sense of reality from the bright blaze. Chuck's shotgun stood in the corner and she wondered hesitantly if she really remembered what he's showed her about it.

Then the noises began. The small, ordinary, everyday noises translated by her terror into monstrous threats. Snow sliding from the roof became a stealthy footstep. The wind tugging at the shutters was the fumbling of a madman. Each new sound rasped like sandpaper on her already raw nerves while the minutes dripped by as slowly as resin falling from a splintered pine.

Suddenly a clear, unmistakable footfall came from the porch. Jaggedly she rose and cried shrilly, "Who's there?" Silence save for the keening of the wind through the evergreens. "Paul, is that you?" Imagination, only imagination. She timidly tried again. "Is someone out there? Paul? Who is it?"

At that moment a pale face flattened itself against the glass in the door. Magda screamed and sank back into the shadows. A soft rapping began and slowly the door-knob turned back and forth as she watched in horror. Again the face pushed against the glass. Thin blond hair straggled down over the forehead and a vacant smile played

about the lips.

This time the pounding sounded stronger. From her crouching position along the wall Magda reached out and felt for the loaded shotgun. Carefully she raised it and tried to steady her shaking hands.

"I have a gun here," she called, controlling her voice as well as she could. "You'd better go away. I—I'll shoot." The stranger gazed blankly through the pane of glass. "Go away or I'll shoot!" she repeated loudly.

Squinting against the glare from the hearth the man raised his left arm and the object in his hand caught the firelight. The door shook under the force of his tightened fist while Magda stood motionless, staring at the axe the man held. Once more the door quivered.

She screamed, "I'll kill you!" The man lifted the axe. Magda closed her eyes and pulled both triggers.

The blast wrenched the gun from her grasp and she fell fainting to the floor. . . .

Vaguely she became aware of the icy chill searching its way through the smashed glass. Next she noticed that the lights were on but the fire had died to powdery ashes. She dragged herself up and walked unevenly to the door. Looking about, she tried to shake off the fog engulfing her. Then she gasped and gagged. There on the porch sprawled a still figure clutching an

axe which shone dully in the moonlight. A dark stain spread across the snow from what had once been a human face.

"Oh my God," she moaned over and over. "But I had to do it, I had to."

The jangling of the phone ripped the fabric of her agony. Picking up the receiver Magda stood silent, listening to the rumble of Mrs. Krupp's warm, excited voice.

"Yah Mrs. Sanderson, you're there yet. Good. I guess they fix the lines okay now. Well, I call to say they think that escaped fella is heading out your way. The men found his tracks and are following. You tell my Paul that. Maybe you

better write it down for him. He's so deaf you know from the big engines. Stay inside and keep your door locked tight, soon the men will come. Maybe get out your husband's shotgun too, Paul's axe is nothing against crazy man . . ."

Quietly Magda laid down the phone as she heard the crunch of footsteps outside. Then she saw a man standing in the moonlight looking in at her. Almost absently stepping over the body on the porch he stooped and picked up the gleaming axe. Blond hair straggled down over his forehead and an empty smile played about his lips as he reached through the splintery opening and unfastened the broken door.



*The gas station attendant looked at him warily at first. Then he shrugged, "Aw, what the hell, he's harmless . . . hey kid, how about a coke?"*

## HARMLESS

BY MILDRED JORDAN BROOKS

THE MAN looked at me. "How'd you like to take a ride in my car, son?" he said.

If that wasn't typical! Me nineteen but he *had* to call me "son."

"I said, son, how would you like to take a ride in my car?"

"Okay," I said. I started getting my things but I was beginning to burn. A stupid question like that makes me mad. "A ride in my car." For crying out loud, if we were going in an airplane we'd be at an airport, wouldn't we? Or by dog sled, in Alaska? We sure as hell wouldn't be here at my house.

The man had the sad, sweet eyes of an undertaker, and the touch of his hand at my elbow was supposed to be reverent. He tried to guide me toward the door.

"Just a minute!" I said. I pulled away. "Maybe I'm not ready yet!"

I was ready, but I can't stand people trying to shove me.

"Oh?" the man said. "Oh?"—like a woman says it. "Well, maybe you'd like to do some last minute checking."

"Okay!" I said. I turned and left the room.

My sister was in my bedroom. Her eyes were red and she held a Kleenex to her nose. She looked surprised when she saw me.

"I forgot something," I said.

"Oh?"

She started in my direction.

"No," I said. "I want to do it myself!"

She stopped; I had to pretend I was looking around. After a minute I walked over to the dresser, opened a drawer and took out a handkerchief.

"You have two in your pocket



now," she said. "Remember? And we packed a lot more. Nice clean white ones—the way you like them."

"I don't care—I need another one!"

I stood there; thinking. I turned on her. "Why don't you leave me alone!" I said. "Why are you *always* telling me what to do!"

"O-oo!" she said. Her voice went high and trembly, and she began dabbing at her eyes. "I'm sor-r-ry," she said.

Carefully, I put the handkerchief in my pocket. There was nothing to do now but go back to the other room.

"All ready?" the man said. He rocked back and forth on his heels and looked like he'd been sent out to save the world.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm ready."

He led me out and my mother and sister started to cry. I wouldn't let that bother me. I knew they were going to cry so I was prepared for it.

We got to the car and the man opened the door. "Nice day to travel," he said. I got in.

"Sure," I said to myself. "Nice day for a burying."

He got in on his side and looked at me with the funeral-parlor eyes. "Don't you think so?" he said. His voice was so schmaltsy like he was still talking to "son."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Fine." But "schmo-blow—" I said to myself, "what does a corpse know?"

"Now listen—" He reached in his pocket and took out a pair of handcuffs and let me look at them. "You're a nice boy and you're going to behave like one. I'm not going to have to put restraints on you." He dropped the handcuffs back in his pocket. "Okay, fellow?"

Now you see what I mean? "Okay, fellow?" Okay if I don't truss you up like some sonavabitch?—Okay, a hole in your head!

He turned the key in the ignition. "No," he said as though it were all settled, "nice guys like you don't need the restraints, do they?"

*No, they sure as hell don't! . . .*

But we were riding now. We went a couple of blocks before the man spoke again. "Would you mind putting your window down?" he said. He pointed to it with his head.

I didn't move for a minute—that's one thing I cannot stand—people always asking you if you mind doing a thing when they know you do. Why don't they just say—oh, to hell with it. I put the window down.

He looked at me. I-knew-you-were-going-to-be-a-good-boy, the eyes said as they spilled out all over me. *Oh, boy, oh, joy, the candlestick maker—I've got myself in good with the undertaker!*

We went on—for miles and miles. I didn't do anything but watch the big charcoal ribbon

that came up at us a mile a minute, smaller at the far end.

After a while the man slowed down. By holding on to the wheel, first with one hand then the other, he took his coat off and I saw the emblem he was wearing underneath—it flashed in the sun like a caution light. He put the coat on the seat between us.

"Let me know if you want to go or anything," he said.

*Or anything.* I'm losing my mind. A word like that can set me crazy. All I got to do is think of the thousand and one anythings that I always wanted and never got. Take Myrtle Gillespie, for instance. One of the anythings I wanted so bad I could taste it, was to get Myrtle out on the West End School football field on a real dark night. Old Fat-stuff Myrtle, as we used to call her—the girl in the ninth grade with the real big feet and everything. And every boy in the room got Myrtle on the football field but me.

But that is sure not one of the anythings I'd mention to this character beside me. Look at him—sitting there with all the schmaltz in his eyes! Can't you just see him on the football field with Myrtle—that shiny thing on his vest the only star out on a blacker-than-hell night.

"You shouldn't have done that!" I said all of a sudden.

"What do you mean? Done what?" He looked innocent.

"You shouldn't have done it!" I was so mad I was talking through my teeth.

"Shouldn't have done what?"

"Myrtle. You shouldn't have done that to—" I stopped; I didn't like the look that had come across his face. And I heard the motor slow down. His foot had let up on the accelerator. I could practically feel the restraints, cold and hard, round my wrists.

"Come again," the man said without moving.

"Nothing." I changed my expression. "I must have been half asleep," I said. "I must have been dreaming."

"Yeah?" he said, looking at me a long time. "Well—be sure it don't happen again."

"It won't." I put the stupid look back on my face, the one he felt comfortable with. I tried to relax. We went on and I went back to the charcoal ribbon.

There was almost no traffic on the road and he drove steadily. On the straight stretches the charcoal ribbon piled up, miles and miles of it kept unwinding, then running up and hitting me in the face until I was sore from the bruises.

I felt my face, then I stretched my legs and sighed.

"What's the matter, son? It's only a few more miles but I bet you're getting hungry."

*Put up or shut up. I know you—you wouldn't bet a dollar that Marilyn Monroe was better*

*stacked than Hetty Green.* Hetty Green was a dame we had in a book at my house. I always thought of her times like this because she was labeled in my mind as the dame most likely not to look like a dame.

"I *said*, are you getting hungry?"

You see!—the kind of liar he is? He said "I said are you getting hungry?" and that's not true. He said, "I *bet* you're getting hungry," a plain statement if I ever heard one. As I always said—it's crazy liars like him always taking people like me places they ought to go themselves.

"No, I'm not hungry but I would like to stretch my legs." I had to say something. You can't sit around damned fools and think. Thinking is one of the things they resent more than anything.

"Legs tired, huh?"

*No, my legs aren't tired. I'd just like to get out and exercise my fingertips.* "Yes, sir. My legs are getting tired."

"Okay. I'm going to stop at the next place we come to and get gas."

I had no idea I was going to say it, but I did. "Then the next place we'll stop and get soda bicarb." I heard it as it came out. And that did sound silly, I admit. But it's a sort of game I used to play. Like someone would say, "and then my eyes fell on the book" and I'd say,

"Hope the book didn't get hurt."

I enjoyed the game till my mother and sister told me I shouldn't play it any more, at least not out loud. But this time it slipped.

"*What* did you say?"

I tried to hold on to the stupid look. "I said—and can we get a soda, too?"

"Is *that* what you said?"

"Yes, *sir*. What did you think I said?"

He looked suspicious. "Never mind. I didn't think you said a damned thing." His eyes had become fishy; it was getting near the end of the funeral. Why keep up the act—the corpse was all but covered over, wasn't he?

"Now sit up there and make like you got a brain," he said.

"Yes, *sir*."

The car stopped at the big service station across from some thick woods. Nobody at the service station but us and the gas station attendant.

"Hi ya, Burt?" the man said.

"Hey." The gas jockey had a real dumb look on his face; when he answered he didn't look at the man, he looked at me. And dumb-acting people really irk me.

"Got another one there?" he said.

"Yeah. Another one. One more."

The man sighed and got out.

Burt kept a little distance and looked in at me.

"How's this one?"

"You know—just a little bit."

"Just a little bit pregnant, huh?" Burt laughed like a sonavabitch, like he'd said something new.

The man glanced back at me. "Well, aren't you going to get out?"

The sun was going down and as it reflected on the silver thing the man had pinned on his vest it just about put my eyes out. And that sort of thing does make me mad.

"No, I don't want to get out," I said. "I've changed my mind."

"Oh, to hell with it. Sit there like a jackass then." He looked tired and started off. "Keep an eye on him a minute while I'm in the john, will you, Burt?"

Burt took a step backwards. "Well, now—"

"Burt—you know me better than that! I tell you, the boy's harmless."

Burt's expression changed. "Forget it," he said. He stuck his chest out and started toward the gas tank. "I'll watch him for you—the poor devil."

Burt kept his eye on me all the time he filled the gas tank, filled the radiator, while he put the oil in and when he took the water can back to the faucet. He refilled the can and set it down. After that he stood for a bit with his hand on the faucet, still looking at me.

Then came the final insult. He glanced toward our windshield, picked up his squirt bottle full of water, reached for a paper towel.

The rack was empty. "Oh, hell!" he said. He twisted his neck for a minute—looking for a rag or something, I thought. He started like he was going into the service station. He seemed to think better of it—he looked back at me and shook his head. A moment later his eyes lit up like he'd discovered an oil can full of gold—he was looking at a little cabinet that hung on a post. The cabinet had a red cross painted on the door; Burt opened it, reached in and pulled out a roll of absorbent cotton. He yanked off a big hunk, squirted the windshield, and with a look of real pleasure on his face began wiping. With *cotton*, this *nice*, *clean*, *white* . . .

. . . I was eight years old and in our apartment on Market Street. From the window I looked down at all the snow that had fallen during the night. It was early, no one was out yet, and the spotless white stuff covered everything. As far as I could see, for blocks and blocks, it was like a big blanket dropped down to cover all the ugliness, all the crumbiness in our neighborhood. It made everything beautiful and white, clean and perfect. I had the feeling that it had been put there just for me, that it was mine—all mine. I was the happiest I had ever been—I raised the window and leaned out.

The door across the street opened. It was Mrs. Murphy. She looked around for a minute,

reached into the entrance, picked up her milk, and *after* she had the milk in her hand she came out and deliberately stepped in the snow. In her big sloppy shoes she dragged her feet through the snow, she made long lines in it with her toes, she jumped up and down. "Wheel!" she said, laughing like a goon—"Wheel!"

Next was old man Simons. He came out, scratched himself while he sized up the situation, this stupid grin came across his face and for no reason at all *he* got out and began trampling in it.

After that as fast as I could turn my head they came—in all directions—everywhere I looked people came and stepped in the snow.

I started to scream. "Get out of there! Do you hear?—get out! *Get your dirty damned feet out of my snow!*"

My mother and sister ran into the room. "Get away!" My mother pulled me back and closed the window. "You'd better be quiet! Do you want people to think you're crazy?"

I shook my head. After that I didn't say any more. But I'd never been so mad in my life as I stood up there and watched all the dumb clucks stepping in the snow.

The cotton was all gray streaks and bugs now—it was ruined. The slob threw it over toward a can, it missed, fell on the concrete. He took a swipe at his forehead with

the back of his hand. He looked toward the coke machine, fished in his pocket, went over and got a coke. He studied me while he took a couple of long pulls on the coke and while he gave out with the belches.

After keeping his eyes on me steady for a minute he held the bottle out toward me. "How about you?" he said. "Want one?"

That gave me my idea! But I had to work fast.

I unclenched my teeth, tried to get the hate off my face, and I put on one of my stupid looks. I nodded my head. "Yeah," I said. "I would like one." I reached into my pocket for change.

Burt brought the coke around to me, I took it and made like I was trying to pay him. He pulled away. "Oh, no, fellow—I don't want—" I let the nickel fall so that it rolled under the car. Burt bent down to pick it up. He reached under the car, I put the coke down and got a good hold on the door handle. When he started back up I was ready for him—I let him have it with the door. I banged him in the head with all I had! When his head and the car door met they sounded like tin thunder. "Get out!" I said. "Get your dirty damned hands out of my snow!"

Burt fell on his back. I got out and stood over him. His eyes opened and he gave me a surprised look. He lifted his arms toward me—I saw he still held

his coke in one hand. I reached in the car for my bottle; I hit him on the head—one, two, three times. His eyes closed, he turned loose his coke, his head fell to one side. After a second I hit him some more. I hit him till all the coke sloshed out, till the bottle broke, and the blood came.

The blood was beautiful—thick, red, and clear. I watched it run down his forehead. I had a *great* feeling—a happy feeling—I felt the way I did that morning when I saw the snow—

The *man*—I remembered the

man! He would come soon!

I looked over at the woods . . . it would be easy to get away.

But did that make sense?

I looked at Burt again. I saw his bottle and reached for it. There was a little coke left in it. I let it pour on Burt.

No, I didn't think that would make sense. There was no need to run away now, because if anyone made me mad I'd *know* what to do.

I got in the car. I put the coke bottle down beside me and I waited for the man.



**RING THE BELL  
FOR  
MENTAL HEALTH  
GIVE!**

**B**ILL POWERS found the sealed unaddressed envelope among a sheaf of business papers on his desk when he returned from lunch, knowing who had put it there even before he picked it up. Although his secretary had taken the afternoon off, still he glanced nervously toward the door leading to her outer office before he opened the envelope, withdrew the note and read it:

*Tuesday Noon*

*I must talk to you. Wait for me in your office after everyone leaves for the day.*

*Peggy*

Frowning, Bill tore the note into pieces, then put them in his jacket pocket to be disposed of later. At one time Peggy Webster's silly little notes had amused him, but lately they had become a source of irri-



**BY LOTTIE BELLE DAVIS**

*He was successful, respectable beyond reproach, and conveniently married. But then he had an affair with a woman . . . and she fell in love with him!*

## THE LOVING VICTIM

tation. Somebody, he'd warned her, might find one, put two and two together and there could be the very devil to pay.

"They make me feel closer to you, Bill," Peggy said. "Working only two doors away and not being able to talk to you is rough."

His lips tight with annoyance, Bill sat down, the pleasant glow of his recent luncheon dissolving into a thumping headache. He reached for the aspirin bottle on his desk, alarmed that the mere thought of Peggy Webster affected him like a poison. The hope that she would leave him alone, in view of the recent scandal here at *Continental Carpet*, was only wishful thinking, he knew. Her brief memo today was in reality a command, for he hadn't had a date with her now in over a week.

William E. Powers was a tall vigorous man of thirty, with thick dark hair and resolute gray eyes. He had come to *Continental Carpet* five years ago as an accountant and three years later married Isobel Connor, the sister of James Connor who was then the vice-president of the firm.

Bill got along reasonably well with Isobel. Although her frigidity bored him, he admired her background and the things she could do for him. While he had worked himself up from the position of accountant to sales manager the hard way, still, he knew, being married to the vice-president's sister had

made his ascent smoother. Besides, Isobel Connor Powers owned a substantial share of the firm's stock . . .

Too, he liked Isobel's appearance. Slender and blonde, with a cool clipped New England voice, she was a gracious wife for a rising young executive. She had also given him a fragile honey-haired daughter, the only person in the world he deeply loved. His future plans revolved around the baby, for he was determined to give Susan all of the things he had missed in his well-remembered poverty-ridden childhood.

He had met Peggy two years ago when she came to work for the late James Connor. And a short time later, on a warm evening in June, he had ridden down in the elevator with her, discovering that both had been working late, that both were hungry and that Peggy had a cold supper in her refrigerator that would easily serve two. As Isobel was vacationing in Maine with Susan, Bill was at loose ends, looking for something to do beside his usual evening at a movie.

The walk across town in a sudden warm summer shower had been fun; the rain-cooled breeze sweeping in from the East River brought them the exciting smell of the sea as they paused in front of Peggy's apartment on the ground floor, front, in one of the few still-standing brownstone houses in New York City.



They had had tall cool drinks of gin and tonic. Peggy had served their cold supper in her comfortable livingroom, cool and quiet and softly lighted. And Bill Powers might not have visited the apartment again had he not taken her in his arms and kissed her good-night . . .

With the exception of her glowing reddish-brown hair, Peggy Webster wasn't attractive. She was tall and quite thin and she had never married. She was five years older than Bill although she claimed the age of twenty eight. Her hunger for affection and her unprobed smouldering passion had at first astonished Bill Powers, then excited and intrigued him. In Peggy's love he had found all that he wanted so desperately in the woman he married.

They had kept the affair quiet, confident that none of their working colleagues suspected that Mr. Powers and Miss Webster had more than a speaking acquaintance with each other. During that first summer, Isobel prolonged her vacation with the baby in Maine and Bill saw Peggy several times a week but always in her apartment.

It had been a perfect place for their dates. Bill carried a key to Peggy's front door which was three steps down from the street. A door hidden from the eyes of pedestrians by a tall boxed evergreen hedge, put there by a former tenant. Usually arriving around

nine o'clock in the evening, Bill let himself into the apartment. He always left at midnight.

It had all been a lot of fun, Powers was thinking now, but since James Connor's shocking expose it had become a dangerous kind of fun and Bill wanted no more of it.

He looked at his wristwatch. The time was three forty. Grateful for not having any business appointments this afternoon, he rummaged in a desk drawer for his pipe, then forgot about smoking as he pulled out a New York newspaper, dated three weeks before, with the full coverage of James Connor's murder and triple love life. Across the front page were pictures of handsome fifty year old Connor, his weeping wife, the hysterical castoff mistress who had killed him and a calm-faced girl of twenty, the beautiful cause of the tragedy.

As he had done many times since the shooting, Powers stared in fascinated horror at the image of his dead brother-in-law. *And all the time*, Bill thought grimly, *you seemed to be a model husband and father, just as I appear to be.*

His hands were shaking, partly from the shock of Connor's violent death and partly from a sudden jolting fear. What did Peggy Webster really think about it all? During the height of the scandal, Bill remembered that she had been strangely silent about her employer's murder, going calmly about

the business of winding up his affairs as any efficient secretary might do.

He got up from his chair, crossed the office to an open window and stood staring down at Madison Avenue swarming with pedestrians in the bright September sun. Suppose, thought Bill Powers, that Connor's aging mistress had given Peggy something concrete to think about? Peggy was far from stupid, Bill knew, surely she must have known that their love affair was over and done with long ago.

He shivered in the mild breeze and wondered desperately how he was going to get off the hook. He knew what Isobel would say in her cool unforgiving voice if she ever found out: "I'm leaving you, Bill. Any divorce court will give Susan to me."

The thought of losing his small daughter haunted him now with sheer terror. Rubbing his aching temples, Bill went back to his desk and sat down. Actually, he began to tire of Peggy a year ago. The best way of breaking it up, he finally decided, was to take a trip. When he informed Peggy this past summer that he intended flying to Burma on his month's vacation, she said happily: "I have a lot of vacation time coming. I'll go too. On a different plane of course."

He stared at her. "Good God!" He exploded. "Get off my back for a while, will you, Peg? Besides, you know Isobel. She might go

with me or decide to join me there."

"Isobel!" Peggy shrilled suddenly. "I'm sick and tired of playing second fiddle to the high and mighty Isobel! I hate her! I detest her because you don't love her and yet she has everything I've ever wanted!"

White-lipped with rage, Bill had grabbed his coat and started for the door.

"Bill—wait!" She pleaded, running after him. "I'm sorry." She pulled his head close to hers and kissed his lips with a bruising fierceness that alarmed him. "The truth is," Peggy whispered, "I don't know what I'd do for a whole month without you. I love you, Bill." She crumpled against him, her thin face adoring him. "Take your vacation," she added, "I'll stay here and miss you. I'll miss you dreadfully."

From that night on their scenes had become frequent. Peggy was restless, becoming more and more possessive, tired of keeping the affair under cover. Bill had gone on his vacation alone, returning to New York with a deep tan, a deeper tiredness, to find Peggy's little welcome note hidden slyly under his pipes in a desk drawer. *Absence*, it read, *makes the heart grow fonder*. Savagely Bill Powers tore the cliché into pieces, knowing that he had a fighting clawing love-hungry tigress by the tail and to let go now meant destruction to a

future he had planned for so long.

The moment she stepped into his office, Bill knew that Peggy Webster was geared for battle. She closed and locked the door before she crossed the room and stood before his desk. "Everyone's gone," she said flatly, "I made sure before I came."

He pushed aside a sales report he'd been studying. "Look, Peg," he said, "I don't want a scene. Somebody could return and hear us."

"I hate sneaking in here like a thief! But we've got to talk. Why haven't you telephoned me?"

"You know why I haven't been in touch," automatically he reached for the aspirins and the glass of water beside them, "what with Connor's death and the scandal—"

"That was three weeks ago," she interrupted bitterly. "Even his business affairs are in order. I haven't seen you alone in eight days, Bill. Why? I know Isobel and Susan are still in Maine."

Bill Powers was silent. He sat watching Peggy pace the floor, clenching and unclenching her fingers in a kind of cold despair. Her new black dress was too short, Powers was thinking, her hair much redder than when he passed her in the corridor this morning on his way to work. A lunch hour visit to her hairdresser? Perhaps a last minute effort to hold her man! He supposed so.

"Bill," Peggy was saying in her

high wheedling voice, "Let's go out someplace for dinner. I've found a tiny French restaurant not far from my apartment. No one we know ever goes there I'm sure. You'd like it, darling. There's candle light and the wine is very good."

"I can't go," Bill said evenly. "I'm having dinner with a customer. Business."

"You mean you won't go!"

The thin veneer of his patience cracked then. "That's exactly what I mean." He stared up at her, his gray eyes hard and resolute. "Peggy, why don't you find a man who can take you out? One who can marry you?"

Her face paled under its careful makeup. "So you do want to get rid of me!" she cried out with all the pain of a wounded animal. "You'll never get away with it!" She pounded the desk violently with her closed fists. "I swear you'll never—" Her hysterical voice trailed off and she stared in silence at the dated newspaper with its sordid account of James Connor's murder. She smiled and her sudden ominous calm frightened Powers more than her raging tantrums had ever done. She said, finally, "That woman was a fool to kill James Connor. I'd use a method all together different if the man I loved abandoned me."

Another tremor of fear ran through Bill, yet he managed to ask casually, "Just what would you do?"

"If he were married, I'd expose him," she answered without hesitation. "No hot seat for me, Bill. Or at best a life in prison." She laughed, but he knew she was deadly serious. "I really don't care about going out for dinner," Peggy added coolly, "so I'll cook it at my place instead. Say tomorrow evening? Same time?"

Bill sighed softly, sure now that Peggy Webster would destroy him—if he didn't destroy her first. "All right," he said, "I'll be there." He looked up at the thin triumphant smile on her lips and he thought: *It'll be our last date together because I'm going to kill you.*

She walked toward the door, glanced back at him, said, "Until tomorrow." She unlocked the door, opened it and was gone, leaving Bill Powers clutching the dated newspaper with trembling hands, his mind already churning with plans for a perfect crime.

At five thirty the following afternoon, after making sure he was alone, Powers locked his office door, then sat down at his desk. He knew exactly what he was going to do from now until midnight, yet it was wise, he knew, to take each giant step slowly. He hadn't slept last night, but in spite of his extreme fatigue, his headache was gone.

He unlocked a desk drawer where he had hidden his props for murder earlier today. He took out

the dated newspaper. It had been read by several employees of *Continental Carpet* that first terrible day of the shooting so it was quite natural, Powers figured, that any number of fingerprints could be on it. He studied the image of his dead brother-in-law and he thought grimly: *You don't mind, do you Jimmy old boy, if I add your secretary to your harem?*

Next he took from the drawer a pair of dark sunglasses, a plastic raincoat, a large bottle of sleeping pills and an autographed photo of the late James Connor, placing them side by side on the desk.

He had bought the raincoat, a common variety sold by the thousands in New York, on his way to work this morning when a light rain had started to fall. The barbiturates had been easy to obtain. He had taken them from the medicine chest at home. Isobel had forgotten them when she fled to Maine with Susan two weeks ago. Bill doubted if she'd miss them and if she did, he would say he'd also had trouble sleeping since Connor's murder.

The photograph had been easy to get also. Isobel had dozens of James Connor, all autographed endearingly to an only sister. Bill doubted if she'd miss it either. Should his fingerprints be found on it, so what? Connor was his brother-in-law; he was always having his picture taken. Who could prove that Bill hadn't handled this one before

Connor gave it to some girl? As for his fingerprints in Peggy's apartment, Bill Powers was covered there too, in case they hadn't been wiped away long ago. He had made a visit to Miss Webster's apartment with Connor's widow, he could honestly tell the police if it came to that. Marion Connor had wanted to talk to her murdered husband's secretary which was quite natural, wasn't it?

As for Peggy Webster's apartment, it was a perfect hideaway for a murder, Powers was thinking. He could not have identified any of the other tenants in the brownstone house because he had never seen them, so how could any of them identify him? The superintendent lived four doors up the street, Bill knew, and the only other person who had a key to Peggy's place was Hetta Long, a woman who came in every Thursday morning to clean.

Bill Powers had planned the perfect crime down to the last small detail. He looked at his wristwatch. The time was five fifty p. m.

At six five p. m., wearing the plastic raincoat for it was still raining, Powers called Peggy Webster from a telephone booth in a busy drugstore on Fifth Avenue, telling her he would be late for their appointment.

Twenty minutes after six o'clock, he bought a ticket at the Metropolitan Theatre on Sixth Avenue, standing in line with other rain-

soaked patrons who were waiting to see the show which started at six thirty and lasted until nine eighteen.

Bill surrendered his ticket finally, standing quite still as the youth in a blue uniform tore in it half and returned the stub without as much as a glance at the tall man in the plastic raincoat and the dark glasses. Behind the green lens, Powers' eyes glinted with satisfaction. He walked inside the theatre, letting the stub fall to the floor.

After he was seated, he watched the show carefully, making mental notes of the stage presentation and of the movie that followed it and at nine eighteen he made his exit with hundreds of other people into a September night that had cleared and was now cool and pleasant.

During the next five minutes he moved fast. He crossed the street from the theatre, stood for an instant looking into a store window while he removed the dark glasses. He put them in his left jacket pocket. In his right pocket were the sleeping pills, the dated newspaper and the autographed picture of the late James Connor.

Powers took off the plastic raincoat and hung it over his arm. Dodging the crowd of hurrying pedestrians he brushed against a wire trash container sitting on a street corner and when he moved swiftly away, the raincoat lay crumpled on top of some discarded newspapers. Two minutes later he

was again in line before the Metropolitan, buying his ticket, edging once more toward the youth in the blue uniform.

"Good evening," Powers said pleasantly, and held out his ticket.

"Good evening," the young man smiled in sudden recognition, then returned the stub.

Bill moved on, tucking the second stub carefully in his trouser pocket. He'd said just enough, he thought. He knew the young man casually, having come to this theatre often in the past.

Inside, people milled about, being seated by busy ushers before the last show of the evening began. Bill walked briskly and quite unnoticed across the back of the theatre, opened an exit door, stepped out into a side street and started east toward Peggy's apartment.

So far, he was thinking, it had all been like a child's game. He grinned suddenly. Amazing how easy it was to fool the people in a teeming city like New York. While there was nothing original in his disguise or alibi, he admitted, there was a lot of damned cleverness in the rest of his plan!

He strode on, his alert eyes on the lookout for someone who might know him among the pedestrians. He saw no one he knew. And when he came to Peggy Webster's door, three steps down from the street and hidden behind its evergreen hedge, he unlocked it quietly and went inside.

Although Powers thought he had prepared himself for anything that might happen the following day, his hands were sweating when his secretary put the afternoon papers with their screaming headlines on his desk.

"I can't believe it," Eve Carney was visibly shaken. "I knew Peggy fairly well. We often lunched together."

Bill was silent, staring down at the black letters splashed across a front page:

#### FORMER SECRETARY OF THE LATE JAMES CONNOR JOINS HIM IN DEATH

The pictures, dug up from the police files, were there too—the murdered Connor, his weeping wife, the mistress who had killed him, the young girl, plus a blurred snapshot of Peggy Webster. Bill began reading the juicy story without any show of emotion, aware of Eve's troubled eyes watching him:

"Peggy Webster, thirty five year old former secretary of the late James Connor, who was vice-president of Continental Carpet, this city, was found dead early this morning in her East Side apartment by Hetta Long, a cleaning woman.

Miss Webster, the police said, took her life with an overdose of barbiturates in a glass of gin and tonic. Beside the body was found a dated newspaper covering the Connor murder three weeks ago,

along with a picture of the dead man, autographed "To my best girl, Your Jimmy".

Police theorized that Miss Webster, despondent over Connor's death took the lethal drink sometime before midnight Wednesday. An autopsy will be performed. . ."

There was a great deal more to the story, but Powers didn't read it. He shook his head slowly. "Poor Isobel," he said, "this will break her up again."

"I still don't believe it!" Eve declared. "I happen to know Peg disliked Mr. Connor. I'm sure she had someone on the string though. I think he was married. She'd never double date."

Bill's eyes narrowed. He reached for a cigarette, his fingers shaking. "Any idea who he was?"

"No. She was very secretive about her evenings. Mr. Powers—in the excitement I almost forgot! Lieutenant Nelson from the 51st precinct is waiting to see you."

"Give me five minutes to clear my desk," Bill said, "then send him in." When she had gone, he swept some business papers into a drawer, straightened an ashtray, then sat back in his chair, trying to quiet the dreadful trembling inside him.

Had anything gone wrong? he wondered. Why was Nelson here? Merely routine? Powers' mind skidded back to last night.

He had entered Peggy's apart-

ment at ten minutes to ten o'clock. She was in the bedroom and had called out, "Hi, Bill. Be with you soon." "Hello, Peg," he'd said. "Pour a drink," she'd said, "make mine the usual way—lots of gin, easy on the tonic." He had poured two drinks of gin and tonic and in hers he had put the lethal dose of sleeping pills, stirring them well before he added the ice cubes, nervously wondering what was keeping her so long in the bedroom anyway.

Soon after consuming her drink she'd said, "That tasted bitter." And then, a short time later, "I can't understand why I'm so sleepy." She slid gently back on the sofa where she had been sitting, her eyes fixed on him with knowing horror, before she sank into a sleep from which she would never awaken.

He hadn't touched her, except to press the almost-empty glass back in her fingers after polishing it well with his handkerchief. Swiftly he wiped off the gin bottle and washed his glass and put both back in place with his handkerchief. He had placed the three week old newspaper and the autographed picture of Connor beside the still figure on the sofa and when he was very sure that he had destroyed all evidence of being there that night he left the apartment, locking the door behind him, being careful to wipe the inside doorknob and the outside one with his handkerchief. He then walked two blocks and

threw the key to Peggy's place in the dark water of the East River. He sat down on a deserted bench beside the river and chain smoked until it was time for the last show to break at the Metropolitan Theatre on Sixth Avenue. A few minutes after midnight he walked into his apartment building and said to John, the doorman, "I've just seen a good show at the Metropolitan. See it if you have a chance." He said goodnight and went upstairs to bed—

Powers swung around in his chair, bracing himself as the office door opened and Lieutenant Nelson entered. He came straight to Bill's desk and stood there a second without speaking.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," Bill said.

"I'll stand," Nelson said. "I'll come straight to the point. You knew Peggy Webster?"

"Of course. She was my late brother-in-law's secretary. A tragic thing, her suicide."

"We don't think it was suicide, Mr. Powers."

Bill's throat seemed suddenly very dry. "But the papers—"

"I know what the papers said," Nelson interrupted. "Do you mind telling me where you were last night?"

"Of course not." Strange, Bill Powers was thinking, how parched his mouth felt when his fingers were like dripping icicles. "Let me see—" he paused, drowning, then continued, "I worked here until

about six. I had dinner and caught the late show at the Metropolitan Theatre."

Nelson's smile was tired. "That oldie," he said softly, and then, "You have the ticket stub to prove it I'm sure."

"As a matter of fact I have," Powers took it from his pocket and threw it on his desk. "It's a habit of mine to keep trifles. My wife kids me about it."

"I see." The lieutenant reached in his pocket and produced a sheet of paper. "This," he said, "is a photostatic copy of a letter found in Miss Webster's robe pocket. It was in an envelope addressed to you, Mr. Powers. I'll read it to you."

Bill's fingers froze on the arms of his chair as Nelson's soft voice beat relentlessly against his ear drums:

*Wednesday night. 9:30*

*Dear Bill,*

*You hate scenes. I'd cry if I said goodbye on our last date together, so I'll mail this after you leave tonight. I could never expose you. I love you too much. I'm leaving New York soon.*

*Your Peggy*

Bill Powers gasped and Nelson looked up sharply from the sheet of paper. "Did you say something, Mr. Powers?"

"I didn't say anything!" Slowly Bill flexed his numb fingers. Peggy and her damned notes, he was thinking. God, he should have



known! There was nothing to do now but bluff it out. He said, "We both know a half cracked letter like that one would never convict a man, Lieutenant. It wouldn't hold water in court. I knew the girl only in a business way, no matter what she wrote."

"There's a postscript, Mr. Powers."

"Postscript?"

The officer nodded. "And this,"

he intoned, "is what it says."

*P.S.*

*Darling*

*You've just entered my apartment with your own key for the last time. I can hear you pouring our drinks in the livingroom as I finish writing this. I'll make tonight beautiful, Bill. You'll never forget it.*



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